

# play

## Okami

*Capcom's marriage of art and action*

**March 2006**  
U.S. \$5.99 CAN \$7.99



**The verdicts are in!**  
2005 Anime Year in Review  
Proof positive that you *NEED* anime!

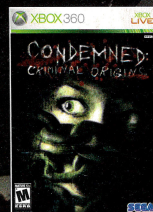


ATURE 17+  
**M**  
Blood and Gore  
Intense Violence  
Strong Language



SEGA

XBOX 360



"Each area features such rich textures, atmospheric lighting, and creepy ambiance that you'd swear that they were real."

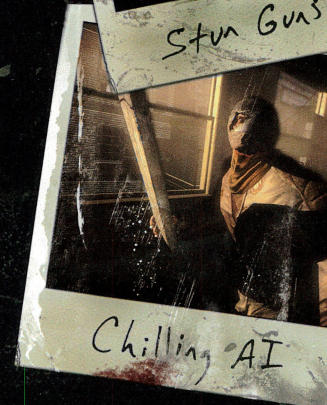
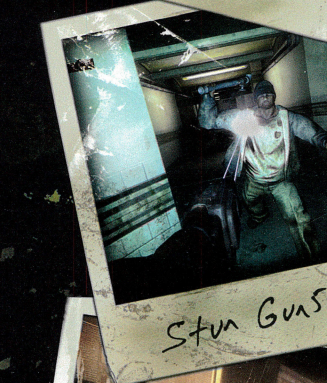
8.75/10 - Game Informer

"The fact that Condemned is pushing the 360 is awesome, but its clever tweak on the first-person genre and its grisly premise are what make it really tick."

8.5/10 - Official Xbox Magazine

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## Letter from the Editor

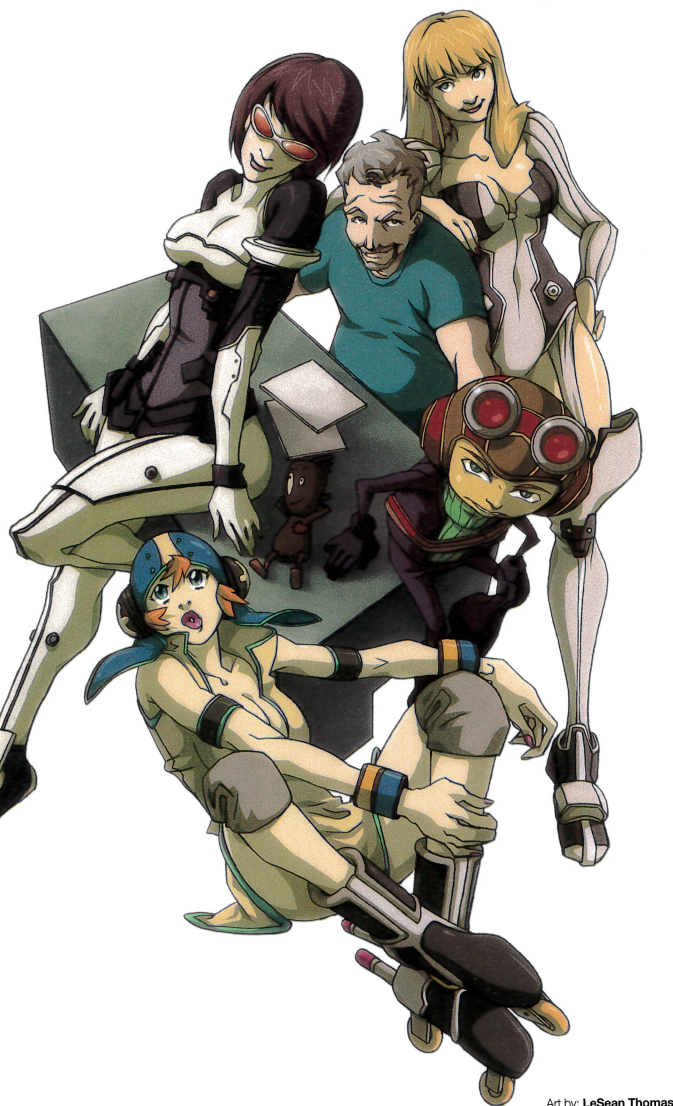
### Blue blue skies I see

**W**e'd have liked to have more features in our first issue back since the break, but as usual it was all a blur by the time we actually sifted through the yield and got down to business, so expect the cavalcade of original content to commence with our April issue and never let up. In the meantime let us know what you think about the tweaks throughout the issue.

If January has been any indication, there won't be any shortage of stories to chase in 2006 in light of all the rumors and innuendo floating around the industry water cooler (more like a tower actually)... Among the rumblings is talk that Nintendo may pull a fast one at E3 and announce an earlier than expected release for Revolution with a newly revolutionized Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess as the ultimate launch title. While this would be the perfect move in light of the 360's post-launch software trickle, I'm not sure how realistic it really is. Nintendo has always been confident to take their time about launching new hardware and I'm not sure they're even worried about the competition (no need, when, for example, Pokemon Emerald is still selling over 1.7 million copies). Zelda is a guaranteed one-to-one purchase at launch, and given the innovation in controller technology alone, it's pretty much a lock that Nintendo will be the serious gamer's console of choice. If they go back to their "Only on Nintendo" ways, watch out. Quality over quantity in this market would be a Mario Baseball-sized homerun out of the park (until super-stores start treating games like DVD movies, it's only going to get more brutal at retail). Meanwhile, Sony doesn't

seem too worried either. The latest has a very limited run of PS3s available at year's end at a staggering (for a console) price (like \$600+). But with the PS2 in fighting shape and the PSP on the rise (piles of great games are on the way), it's anyone's guess as to how fast they'll care to usher in the new super-system, which, given the space between launches will most assuredly be by far the most powerful of all the consoles—the only question being how easy, or not, it will be for developers to utilize. Sony's way out in front, has super-human R&D, and hasn't had so much as a hiccup since the PS launched... Then again, once upon a time Nintendo was in the same spot, so never say never. Not that we'd ever count out MGS. Live Arcade is the most promising online venue the industry has yet seen, they were first to market, and they're surely in possession of some heavy hitters to unload at E3. There have even been rumors of a Microsoft handheld... Now that would be interesting, if not a little confusing. It's difficult enough keeping up with two, and the Gizmodo is bound to poke its head out one of these days. Sad fact is that at this point I'm not sure anyone cares. The PSP and DS are very different and are both bound for glory in the years to come... Extreme Ghouls 'n' Ghosts anyone? New Super Mario Bros? I think we're good.

**Dave Halverson** Editor In Chief



Art by: LeSean Thomas

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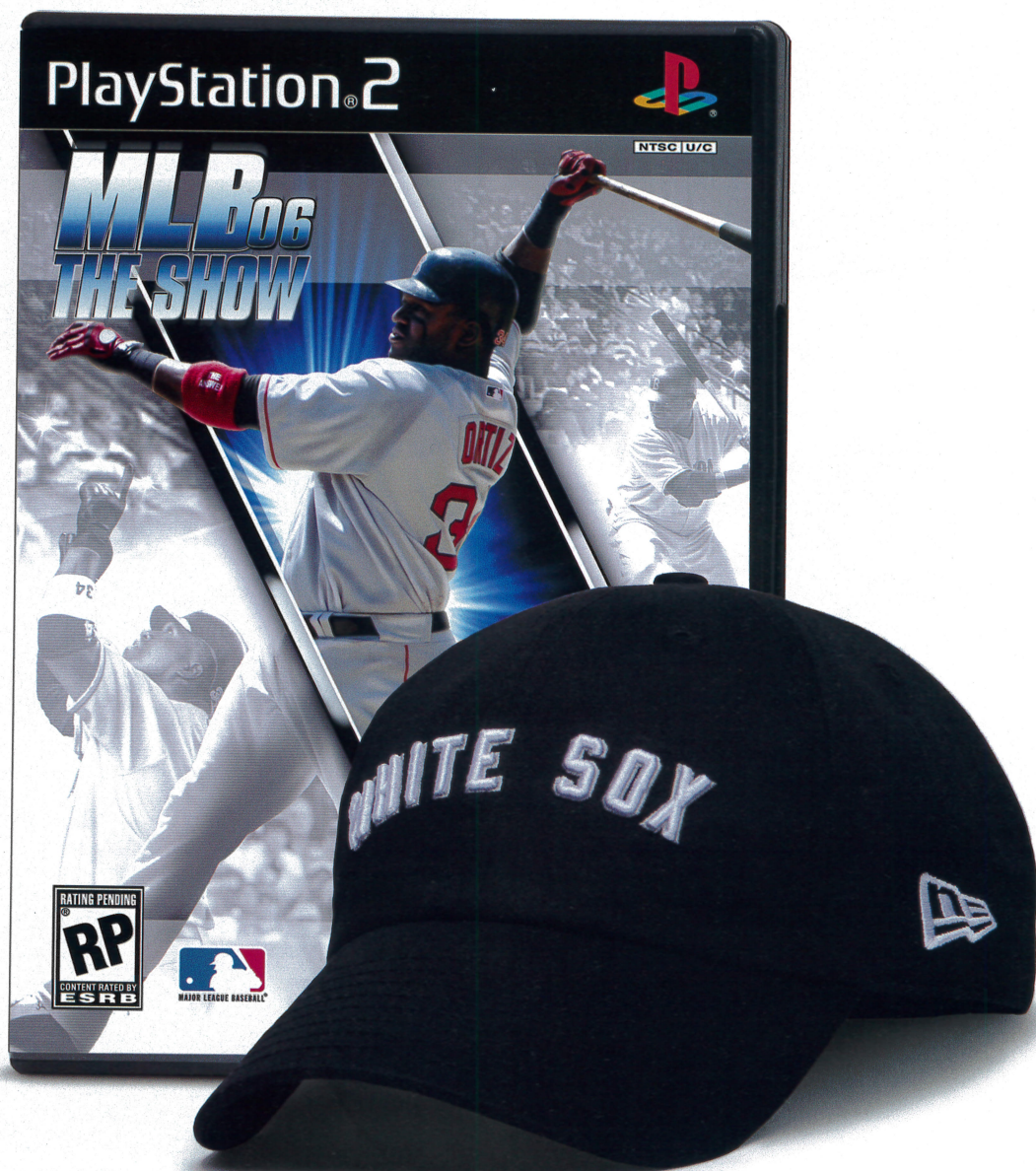


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## Playback

We have smart readers. It's a fact. Some have microwaves (also a fact)

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## Ink

High Moon's Commander in Chief takes us behind the merger

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## Cover Story

### Okami

Capcom's stunning new PS2 game is nothing short of a revelation—a convergence of enchanting art, fresh gameplay, and an evolving landscape where you fill in the blanks

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Greg Orlando takes a PG-13 look behind the sweaty, jiggly, body slamming scenes of Konami's naughty but oh so nice girl on girl wrestling wunderkind

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A sexy new snap of Lara's upcoming Legend, EA's latest take on *Lords* on many more

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Fresh from FF VIII rehab, Casey Lee puts on his socks and climbs back on the saddle to bring us a rousing look at Grandia III, Greg takes on Fight Night & Brady takes 24

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Goodbye Preview Gallery, hello 1/2. New super-sized cap reviews that give us a little room to ramble

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## play Mobile

March Mobile is packed with power from Daxter and Pursuit Force for PSP, to Guilty Gear Dust Strikers for NDS and Tales of Phantasia for GBA. 11 games in all! Bonus!

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The amazing Mr. Griffin goes completely berserk on SIN Episodes Emergence in a stunning 5 page art soaked, info packed extravaganza

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Nick and Dai live from Japan: It doesn't get any better. Up this month is Sony's Rogue Galaxy, FROM Soft's [eM]-eNCHANT arM-, the reign of the DS and even more

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Between Play Japan and Brady's Snatcher rebirth 3 classics are on display

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## Feature: 2005 Anime Year in Review

The votes are in. Tabulated between Play editors both here and abroad and our top secret Otaku lab we count down the Top 25 titles of 2005; celebrate every genre, and then some

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Howls Moving Castle and Desert Punk kept us happy all month when we weren't ogling Loveless, Zero: The Beginning of the Coffin, Imperfect Hero and Love Rama

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Corpse Bride and Bubble make Dave and Brady very happy

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## The Back of the Book

Griffindor waxes poetic



# THE FATE OF THE ENTIRE GALAXY IS IN YOUR HANDS. ARE YOU READY?

## THE FLEETS

Do you quickly build a fleet of TIE fighters and swarm the enemy before they gain strength? Or take time and build a more powerful fleet of Star Destroyers?

## THE WEAPON

Do you protect the Death Star and reveal it at a critical moment? Or do you break out your big gun first and use Rebel planets for target practice?

## THE CREATURES

Do you attack head-on and risk massive casualties? Or flank the enemy, circle around and hope any rancors you meet along the way aren't hungry?

## THE ARMIES

Do you crush bases under the feet of AT-ATs and risk losing a few? Or do you call down ships from space and bomb them back to the Stone Age?

## THE ELEMENTS

Do you wait until after the ice storm and lose the element of surprise? Or do you take advantage of low visibility and attack when they least expect it?

# STAR WARS EMPIRE AT WAR

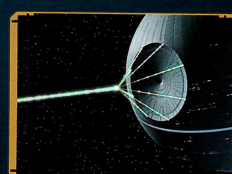


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Fantasy Violence

Game experience may change during online play.



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## LETTER OF THE MONTH

### Strident or bust?

I read with joy that Dee Lee told you Strident wasn't canceled, back in the August '05 edition. Now I read (Nov. 30) at Gamespot that Sang Youn-Lee has told Famitsu that he's promised the Strident team to a hastily formed 99 Nights deal. WHAT IS THE DEAL WITH THAT, AND WHAT IS HIS \*\*\*\*ING PROBLEM???

If this is true, then it is a sell-out that will be remembered very harshly here. Say it ain't so, guys. Stunning Strident was a promise made many times over.

*We're with you. We've contacted the studio, so now it's a waiting game. Stay tuned.*

### Port Authority

I don't like ports. Despite press pandering, online ogling, and round-the-clock fanboy fanaticism, I am proud to let personal integrity win out over subservient devotion. Porting is little more than an overt mechanism for cashing in on already finished work, yet oddly enough most of the world chooses to see things otherwise. To them, it's not about making money but instead "giving gamers what they want." As if everyone wants to relive their memories instead of making new ones. It's one thing if you've never played the product before, but most of the die-hard port purchasers seem to be, ironically, those who still possess the means to play the original product, but lust over the thought of easier accessibility.

Ultimately, however, neither side represents an adequate case for such unrelenting appreciation, especially when it's not even deserved in the first place.

Appropriately enough, the best example of "pointless porting" is also the most recent: Square's Final Fantasy 4 Advance. As my favorite game in the series, one might think that I'd be euphoric at the thought of replaying it.

"Unfortunately," I've never lost the ability in the first place having

never sold my old game consoles or games. What prospect, then, would the Gameboy Advance version have for me, especially after the recent ports on both the PSOne and [Japan only] Wonderswan Color? It's simple really: the notion of playing a definitive version of the game, the idea of playing a truly superior creation; one that blows the original out of the water yet still feels like "home".

What I get, however, is a pathetic "update" to the trivially altered WSC port released in 2002: minutely improved graphics, a changeable end-game roster, and two rather pointless bonus dungeons. And those are the good aspects, I might add. What I also get, unfortunately, is atrociously unbalanced enemy difficulty (i.e. the first and last 5 hours of gameplay),

are of actual merit to warrant it (hint: the outlier goes by the name of Final Fantasy IV Advance). Am I supposed to believe that it took the same amount of effort to port Cecil's heroic quest as it did to create Soma Cruz's all new "Metroidvania" adventure? PLEASE. Why do these mindless gamers even buy new products to begin with when it's quite clear all companies need to do is repackage their old crap? How anyone can blissfully spend \$35 on this indolent port is perplexing enough, even more so considering they will no doubt spend the same amount next year when Square's extensive FF3 remake hits the DS. It's beyond belief--and common sense.

Something really needs to be done here. In the entire history of Nintendo's

## "Porting is little more than an overt mechanism for cashing in on already finished work..."

a stop-motion type screen scrolling effect (it's just plain nauseating), and a glitch-ridden combat engine (Double-attacks? ATB freezing?? Spell and item listing SLOWDOWN??). Maybe I set my expectations too high, but something seems just a bit fishy when a 32-Bit "modern" gaming handheld can't adequately run software created for 15-year-old hardware. Because the GBA can run Final Fantasy IV, Square didn't optimize the game for IT. A typical case of consumer exploitation: "we make it and they will buy it."

Not surprisingly, the ubiquitous reaction to such a profound insult of customer intellect is not anger and disgust; rather it's of blissful glee and contented satisfaction. Because apparently mainstream gamers believe that it's "OK" when companies profit at their expense, when their hard-earned money (or rather their "parents'") funds a shoddy weekend programming exercise rather than, say, the product of actual recent work, like Castlevania Dawn of Sorrow (DS) or Mario Tennis Advance (GBA): All three cost the same price, yet only two

Gameboy handheld, not once has Square created a true Final Fantasy (wake-up call people: those old GB "Adventures" and "Legends" were actually part of the [Romancing] Saga franchise but renamed for America). Despite having a stable, dedicated 2-D platform with which it can eternally program in the glory days of "old school" gaming, Square perpetuates a belief that only home consoles are worthy of receiving quality efforts. That the GBA is only deserving of a niche-Tactics spin-off, even the PSP of another FFVII cash in. Why am I playing the fourth incarnation of Final Fantasy 4 instead of an all-new game created in its image? Wake up already people, and stop with the fanboy rhetoric; maybe then companies like Square will actually have to work for their money.

Ashley W.

### By Design

Thank you for including your indie-circuit section, and I wanted to tell

you and everyone of a great website: [www.experimentalgameplay.com](http://www.experimentalgameplay.com). It has tons of little games based on quirky ideas, all done by students, all less than seven days of work by one person only. Many of them have turned out very impressive. Now, for the butt kissing. I am going to school for game art and design. Many of the kids I know in my program are clueless. Their favorite genres are racing and Madden (yes, I consider Madden a genre). Most haven't played Ico or Katamari. I think that says it all. They all get their subscriptions to those magazines that jam-pack the book cover to cover, and the thing looks like someone put some articles, some pictures, and a monkey through a paper shredder and glued it together. I adore your magazine for the fact that it is so well-designed. Play, you are beautiful, elegant, and classy. And thanks Dave for showing me Gunvalkyrie and Psychonauts. It's games like that and a magazine like yours that give me the passion for what I do today.

--James B.  
Ace designer and future rich person

### Microwave PSP?

I was playing Lumines PSP WiFi versus with my sister this past Christmas, after kindly giving her a PSP w/Lumines for her present, and a funny thing happened! My mom turned on the microwave in the next room, and it created.... PSP game lag!!!

The game was laggy and delayed, reminded me of 16-bit graphics lag back in the day. After the microwave turned off, it was all good!

Scott W.





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## GENERATION OF CHAOS

COMING SPRING 2006







## Moon over Universal

*VU Games strengthens its console core with the acquisition of High Moon Studios*

Whenever an independent studio—particularly one as promising and multi-faceted as High Moon Studios—gets “acquired,” the red flags at Play are immediately hoisted to full mast, especially when it’s by a giant like Vivendi Universal. Next thing you know they’re cranking out licensed games on a budget and that’s a wrap. So long Jericho! Goodbye forthcoming hotty that graced our GoG V3 cover! But something told us that couldn’t be the case with Farzad and friends so we went to the source: Company President John Rowe for the inside scoop...

There are two types of “acquisition” news. 1) A licensing giant needs more warm bodies to crank out more movie- or TV-licensed games or 2) A licensing giant needs a great studio to develop triple-A original games and make their licensed properties shine like King Kong and The Chronicles of Riddick. Which type is this?

It’s the latter of the two.

How’s your resident wunderkind Farzad with the transition? Will he be as free to create?

Certainly the value of High Moon Studios is in part the ability to create original content. To that end, Farzad and our entire creative staff is enthusiastic about the ability to do what they do best with the support of VUG. They’re a major game company that can create opportunities for original IP. What’s on the public record speaks to their current leadership role in the game space. While their greatest success is in PC, an

important area for them is growing the console business in the next generation, which is where our development is focused.

What does this mean for a next generation Darkwatch?

In the past, I’ve expressed the opinion that Darkwatch was a good first effort for our studio. It’s a compelling and original world, and we’re certainly enthusiastic about any opportunity to grow it as a game experience into the next generation.

Speaking of Darkwatch, how did it fare amidst the current sorry state of American game retail?

We’re probably the harshest critics of Darkwatch’s success, as we should be. To be honest, I was disappointed with the overall sales in the North American market. I think there are several reasons for this, the first being that we set very high expectations. Unless we were in the top

20 games for the year, we weren’t going to be satisfied. The market in the fourth calendar quarter of 2005 and going into 2006 has been particularly challenging. It’s also difficult to introduce new IP late in the hardware cycle with a relatively modest advertising and marketing budget. As a result we’re not satisfied, though we believe we’ve established a good foundation on which to build the franchise.

**Seems like these days even a mediocre success for an original game is miraculous. Will we see other High Moon original games or are you relegated to what VU assigns the studio?**

An expectation of mine is that we’ll continue to work on new and original games. The creation and ownership of a new franchise is the best scenario for success in this business. VUG knows that one of our core competencies is the creation of original IP, and they’ve proven to be very savvy in the way they invest in new and established properties, balancing the risks involved with each.

**So you’ll be growing. Has the hiring gun fired?**

It has. Our hiring effort is to build on the existing creative and technical expertise of the studio and bring in that same caliber of talent to grow our output capabilities. We recognize an opportunity for High Moon to be among the top developers in the next generation.

**Recently, another VU studio, Radical, has done a great job with the Hulk franchise and is now charged with ushering the Crash franchise into the next generation. Given your studio’s phenomenal art background will you be sharing resources?**

I have a lot of respect for Radical and they’re a great bunch of guys. If there’s any way we can share resources efficiently and effectively, we’ll pursue it.

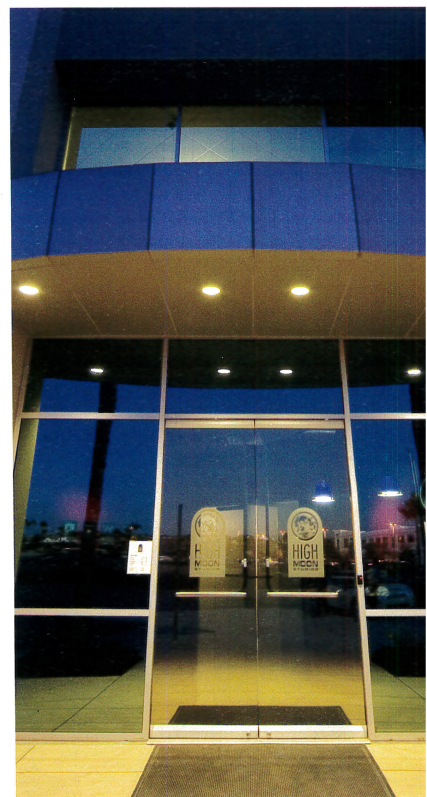
**So this sounds like a win-win. Couldn’t happen to a nicer or more talented**

**group. Any hints as to what your first game will be?**

First, thank you for the nice comments. We certainly appreciate your high opinion of us, and we’ll strive to live up to your expectations. We have to make game announcements when the time is right for each project, and that would be a VUG marketing decision. Certainly, from my perspective I would like what we produce next to be more, better, faster: We want to grow beyond first-person, and expand our gameplay experience into third-person and larger, more accessible worlds.

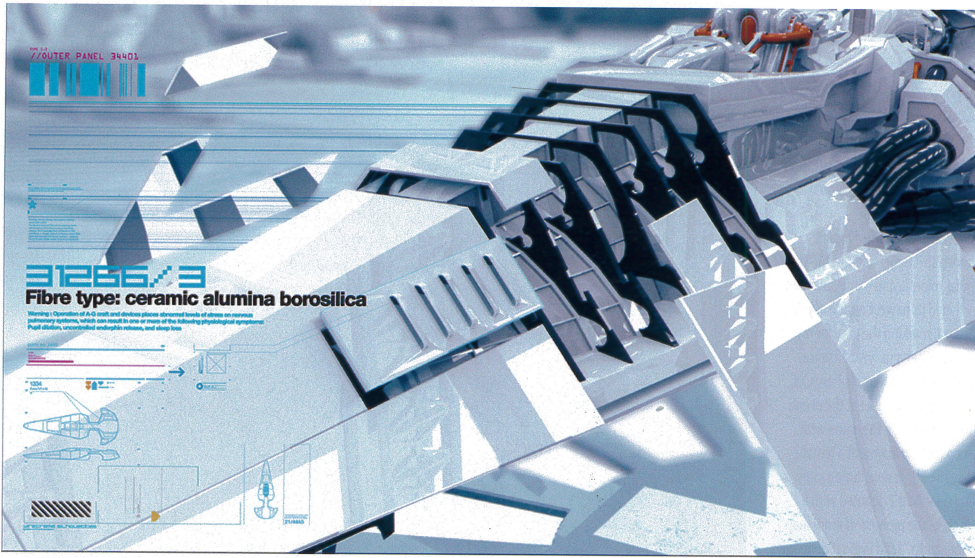
*“They’re a major game company that can create opportunities for original IP. What’s on the public record speaks to their current leadership role in the game space.”*

Can Tala and Cassidy come out to Play?





# ink



## Pixel perfect

*Into the Pixel celebrates another year of fine video game art*

Into the Pixel, the one and only videogame art exhibition that sounds the opening bell for E3, is entering its third year. Co-founded by the Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3), the Academy of Interactive Arts & Sciences, and the Prints & Drawings Council of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), Into the Pixel is an art exhibit created to give computer and video game artists a platform for their achievements for both their peers and renowned fine art experts. Last year, nearly 1000 guests attended the gallery opening event at E3 after which the art remained on display for the duration, allowing more than 70,000 attendees to ogle the framed creations. For 2006, the exhibition hopes to expand the conversation

of how these gifted artists are using video games as their medium and if the list of jurors is any indication they better have it at a Starbucks. They are: Kevin Salatino, Lead Juror, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Cynthia Burlingham, Hammer Museum, Ryan Church, Skywalker Ranch, Caryn Coleman, art gallery sixspace / art.blogging.la, Tim Langdell, University of Southern California /EDGE Games, Lorne Lanning, Oddworld Inhabitants: President/Creative Director, and Louis Marchesano, Research Library, Getty Research Institute: Collections. The Website for this year's submissions went live February 8th so for details on submissions visit [www.intothepixel.com](http://www.intothepixel.com)



From last year's exhibit, art from SCEA (above), Oddworld Inhabitants and Ubisoft respectively

*"Last year, nearly 1000 guests attended the gallery opening event at E3..."*



Artwork by Full Sail Student-William "Forrest" Crump

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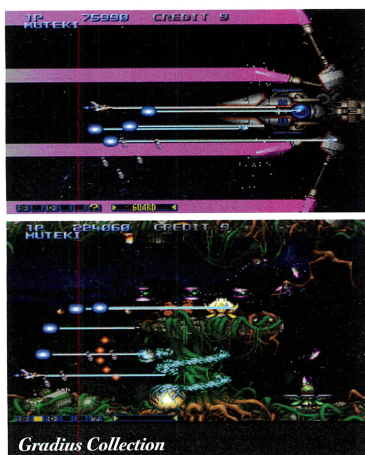


## Konami's Solid Showing

*Company unveils its 2006 lineup*

It truly was a day for gamers when Konami marshaled its forces in San Francisco to show off its wares for the coming years. In addition to unveiling approximately 20 console and handheld game titles, Konami also announced a partnership with West Virginia and proclaimed it had created a whole new genre of digital entertainment for the Sony PSP.

Konami brought out its big guns for the one-day press event. Although its two biggest superstars Hideo Kojima and Akira Yamaoka (of the Metal Gear Solid and Silent Hill series respectively), were not in attendance, both sent pre-taped messages hyping their various projects. In their stead, Konami trotted out



Gradius Collection



Silent Hill Experience



The new DS dungeon crawl: Taos Adventure

Dance Dance Revolution's creator Yoshihiko Ota, Rumble Roses's outspoken producer Akari Uchida, and Shinta Nojiri, who's heralded as the brains of the Metal Gear Acid series.

There was much to see and a lot to celebrate. Konami announced its long-running franchise Frogger had just hit its 25th anniversary, and the popular role-playing game Suikoden, its 10th. Further, the company hyped its newest arcade offering Dance Dance Revolution Supernova, marking the popular rhythm series' return to coin-operated glory after a six-year absence.

There were many games to be had, too. Rumble Roses XX, Konami's first next-generation title, was playable at the event, with Uchida highlighting his presentation on the game with a demonstration of how it was possible to augment a female wrestler's breast size to swell like the Mississippi during rainy season. The PSP-exclusive Metal Gear Acid 2 debuted with a brand-new cel-shaded graphic style, the promise of more than 500 cards to use within the game, and a "Solid Eye" set of goggles which fit over the PSP, allowing players to experience the game in three dimensions.

Konami also announced its popular shooter Gradius will be coming to the Sony PSP this spring. Gradius Collection includes five separate titles in one package: Gradius I, II, III, and IV and Gradius Gaiden, which was never released in the United States. Suikoden V was similarly hyped, with the game returning to its roots with the return of 6-man adventuring parties.

There was more, and sometimes more is less. The phrase "boot-scooting" was tossed around in conjunction with CMT Presents: Karaoke Revolution Country, a game wherein players

**"Konami also announced its popular shooter Gradius will be coming to the Sony PSP this spring..."**

can belt out such classics as the "Dukes of Hazzard" theme song and Patsy Cline's "Crazy." The shock and awe was offset by the announcement of Beatmania's upcoming release; the rhythm-style game includes two versions of the arcade favorite and a special DJ controller.

Both Silent Hill and Metal Gear formed the vanguard for what Konami hyped as a new genre of entertainment for the PSP. Few details about these projects were given out, but both Silent Hill Experience and the Metal Gear Digital Comic seem to be fusions of comic book art, movies, and game footage. Interactive bits and hidden content for each of the titles was promised, but there was no hint as to how they'd be integrated. In addition, Konami revealed a new USB plug-in allowing players to directly link to a web site where gamers could engage in online card matches of Yu-Gi-Oh! The DuelPass Key, as it's called, works with all PCs and includes an electronic deck to play with, as well as an exclusive card.

In the day's oddest news, Konami also told those in attendance it had formed a three-year partnership with West Virginia to provide Dance Dance Revolution arcade games to the state's 765 public schools. The program is meant to combat childhood obesity, and Dance Dance Revolution will formally be added to the schools' physical education curriculum, with various organizations—among them the West Virginia Department of Education, Konami, and Mountain State Blue Cross Blue Shield—monitoring the project to note its progress.

## 20 Years of TMNT and counting

*Ubisoft joins the parade of ooze*

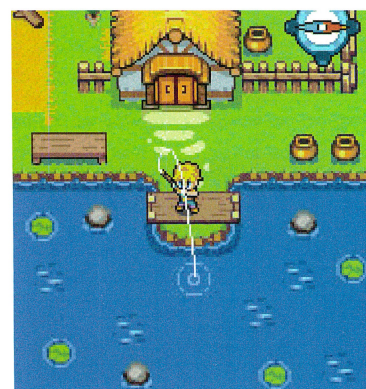
It's not over until the fat turtle sings and apparently there's no such thing as a fat turtle, at least one of the Teenage-Mutated variety. In conjunction with the upcoming all new CG movie scheduled to hit theatres in 2007, Ubisoft (that's right, not Konami) has announced a licensing agreement with 4Kids Entertainment and Mirage group to develop and publish the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles game based on the film, to be available at roughly the same time. Not only is a next generation Turtles game assured but there's also the possibility that Montreal Studios will get the nod, especially given that the PG-rated film will be more along the lines of the original comic-book series and therefore grittier than previous movie or TV efforts. Hopefully more details will be forthcoming.



## Cell us a good game

*Shroud promises to up the cell phone game ante*

Your World Games intends to break new ground in GPS-enabled gameplay with "The Shroud," the first-of-its-kind RPG that merges traditional console role-playing with your mobile phone. The idea is to have gamers champion their own farming communities protecting the town from impending forces, completing side quests and solving puzzles in a game equally enticing for the short haul or months on end. Unique to The Shroud (and similar to what Gizmondo is all about) is the implementation of its GPS functionality which allows players at any time to enter contests by visiting real-world locations to compete for special items and high scores supported by an internet leader-board that will be available to check the rankings, buy and trade items, and share hints and tips with other players. Is the world ready? If you'd like to know more visit [www.yourworldgames.com](http://www.yourworldgames.com).



MGS Digital Comic



# Splitting up to save their home... Reuniting to save the world!

*"This underdog series of 2D RPGs has proven that even new-school gamers can learn to love old-school gaming goodness."*

- Newtype USA

*"Atelier Iris 2 will be another worthy addition to any RPG fan's collection."*

- GameInformer

## ATELIER IRIS 2

THE AZOTH OF DESTINY

Coming Spring 2006



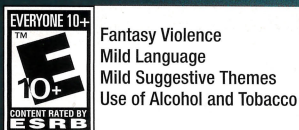
Feel the rush of battle with the new Action Cost Time Battle System!



Switch main characters to experience both Edén and Belkhyde!



Master the Art of Alchemy to create everything you'll need from weapons to medicine!



PlayStation 2





# Database

Purchase any title featured below at your nearest Virgin Megastore or online at [virginmega.com](http://virginmega.com)

## Your Megastore Beckons!

Sponsored by:



### Winning Eleven 9

Konami / Xbox, PS2, PSP

WE's back for number 9 with two new positions (Wing Back and Second Top) and a mobile version.



### Star Craft Ghost

Blizzard / Xbox, PS2

Can it be? Will Nova finally emerge and let us fondle her Ghost? The tension mounts...again.



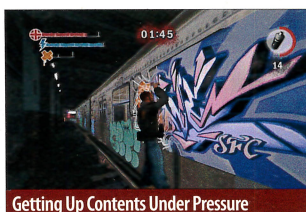
### 50 Cent Bulletproof

VU Games / Xbox, PS2

50 say's his game is OK for kids but it would certainly seem otherwise. Hasn't affected sales!



Virgin Megastore Top Ten	
01	Getting Up Contents Under Pressure Atari / PS2, Xb
02	AND 1 Streetball UbiSoft / PS2, Xb
03	Winning Eleven 9 Konami / PS2, Xb, PSP
04	College Hoops 2K6 2K Sports / PS2, Xb, Xb 360
05	Starcraft Ghost Blizzard / Xb, PS2
06	50 Cent Bulletproof VU Games / PS2, Xb
07	The Warriors Rockstar / PS2, Xb
08	Resident Evil 4 Capcom / PS2, GC
09	Grand Theft Auto: Liberty City Take 2 / PSP
10	Star Wars Battlefront 2 LucasArts / PS2, Xb



Getting Up Contents Under Pressure



AND 1 Streetball

NPD/TRSTS Top Ten Sept. Game Sales	
01	Madden NFL 06 EA / PS2
02	Star Wars Battlefront II LucasArts / PS2
03	Need For Speed Most Wanted EA / PS2
04	WWE Smackdown Vs Raw 2006 THQ / PS2
05	Call of Duty 2: Brothers In Arms Activision / PS2
06	Mario Kart Nintendo / DS
07	Tony Hawk: American Wasteland Activision / PS2
08	Peter Jackson's King Kong UbiSoft / PS2
09	GTA Liberty City Stories Take 2 / PSP
10	50 Cent Bulletproof VU Games / PS2



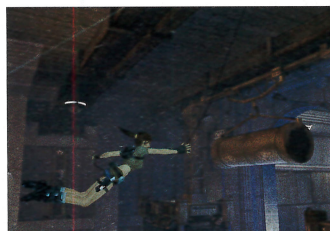
Madden NFL 06



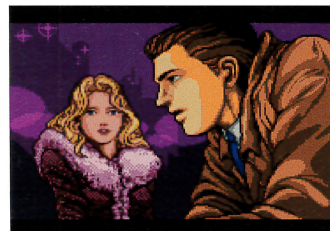
Star Wars Battlefront II

## Play Editors' Top 5

Dave Halverson	
01	Tomb Raider Legend Eidos / PS2, Xb, Xb 360
02	Okami Capcom / PS2
03	Daxter SCEA / PSP
04	Mega Man X Maverick Hunter Capcom / PSP
05	Knuckles Chaotix Sega / 32X



Brady Fiechter	
01	Snatcher Konami / Sega CD
02	Mario Kart DS Nintendo / DS
03	Mario Strikers Nintendo / GC
04	Ridge Racer 6 Namco / Xb 360
05	Tales of Phantasia Namco / GBA



Greg Orlando	
01	Fight Night Round 3 EA / Xb 360
02	Animal Crossing: Wild World Nintendo / DS
03	Ape Escape 3 SCEA / PS2
04	Fable: The Lost Chapters Microsoft / Xb
05	Warship Gunner 2 Koei / PS2



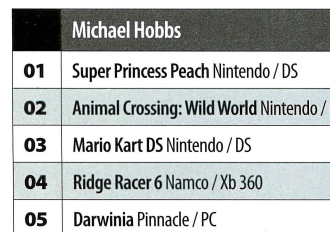
Casey Loe	
01	Ryu Ga Gotoku Sega / PS2
02	Castlevania: Dawn of Sorrow Konami / DS
03	Grandia III Square Enix / PS2
04	Okami Capcom / PS2
05	Dead or Alive 4 Tecmo / Xb 360



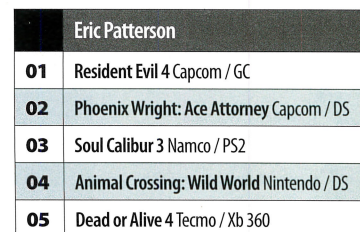
Nick Des Barres	
01	Kingdom Hearts 2 Square Enix / PS2
02	Dirge of Cerberus: Final Fantasy VII Square Enix / PS2
03	MGS 3 Subsistence Konami / PS2
04	[eM] -eNCHANT arM- FROM Software / Xb 360
05	Monster Hunter Portable Capcom / PSP



Michael Hobbs	
01	Super Princess Peach Nintendo / DS
02	Animal Crossing: Wild World Nintendo / DS
03	Mario Kart DS Nintendo / DS
04	Ridge Racer 6 Namco / Xb 360
05	Darwinia Pinnacle / PC



Eric Patterson	
01	Resident Evil 4 Capcom / GC
02	Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney Capcom / DS
03	Soul Calibur 3 Namco / PS2
04	Animal Crossing: Wild World Nintendo / DS
05	Dead or Alive 4 Tecmo / Xb 360







It only plays like it's still there. The new Xbox 360™ Wireless Controller. Unmatched precision and performance to instantly reflect your every move. And with an advanced ecosystem of wireless products, you'll have the freedom to get the most out of Xbox 360, because they come from Xbox.



Wireless Networking Adapter



Universal Media Remote



Play and Charge Kit

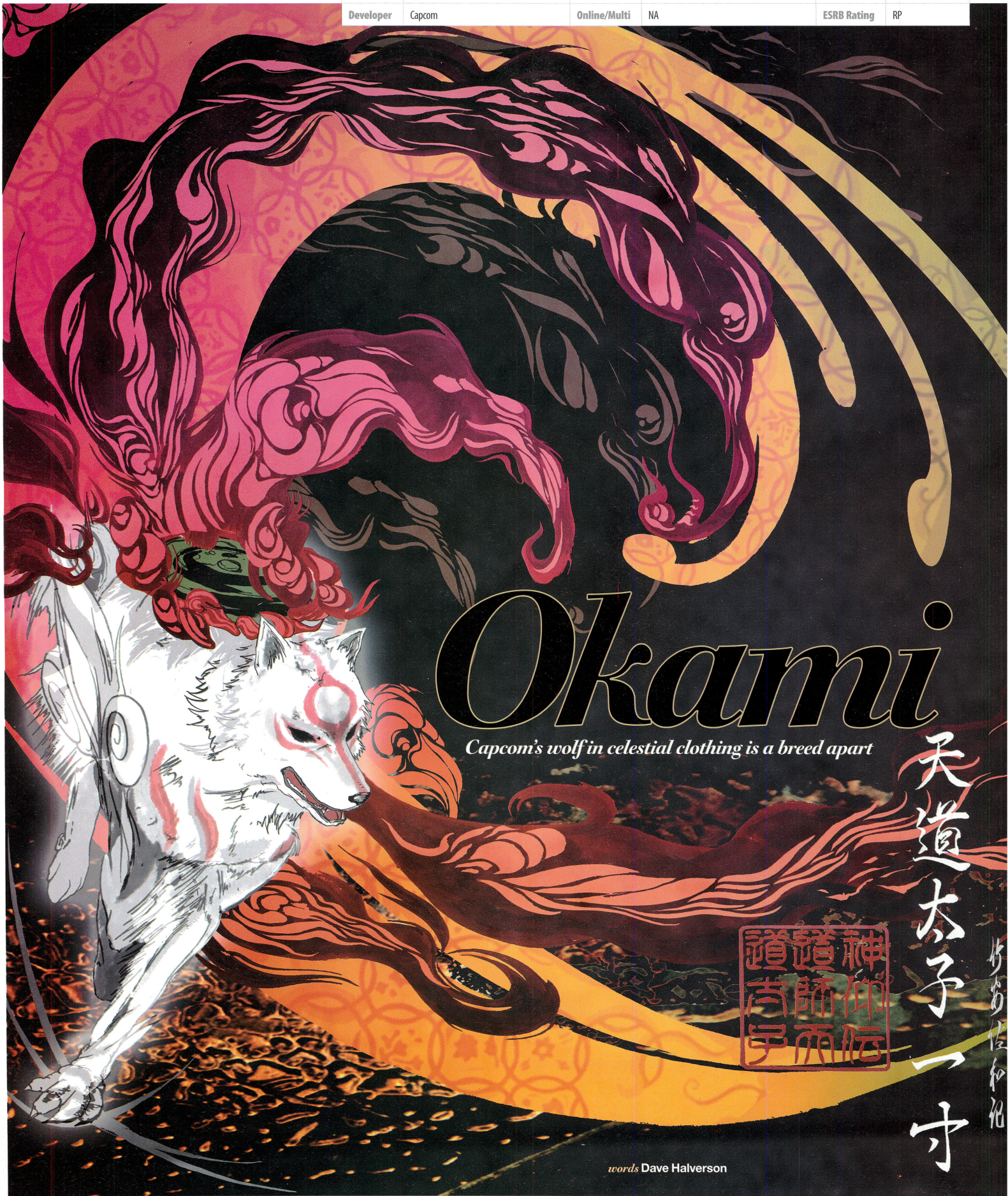


Jump in.





System(s)	PlayStation 2	Publisher	Capcom	Available	June
Developer	Capcom	Online/Multi	NA	ESRB Rating	RP



# Okami

Capcom's wolf in celestial clothing is a breed apart

天道太子一寸



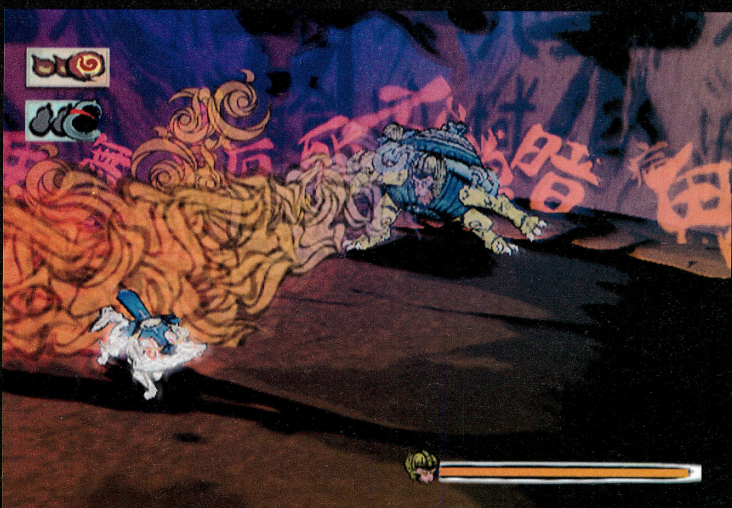
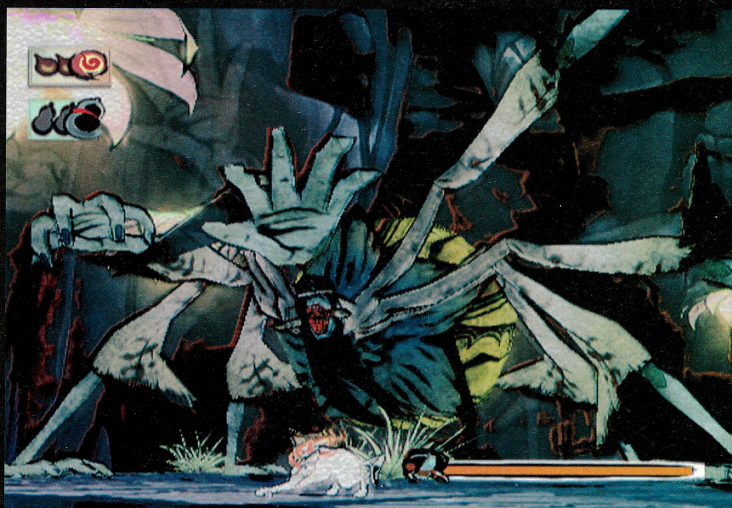
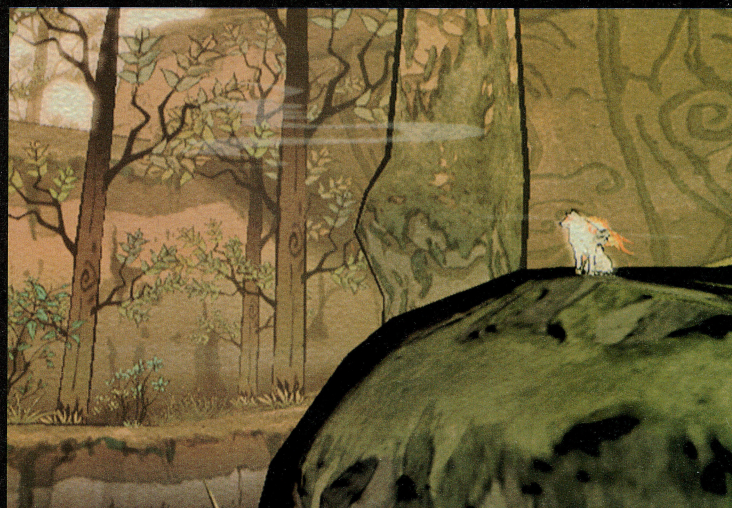
words Dave Halverson



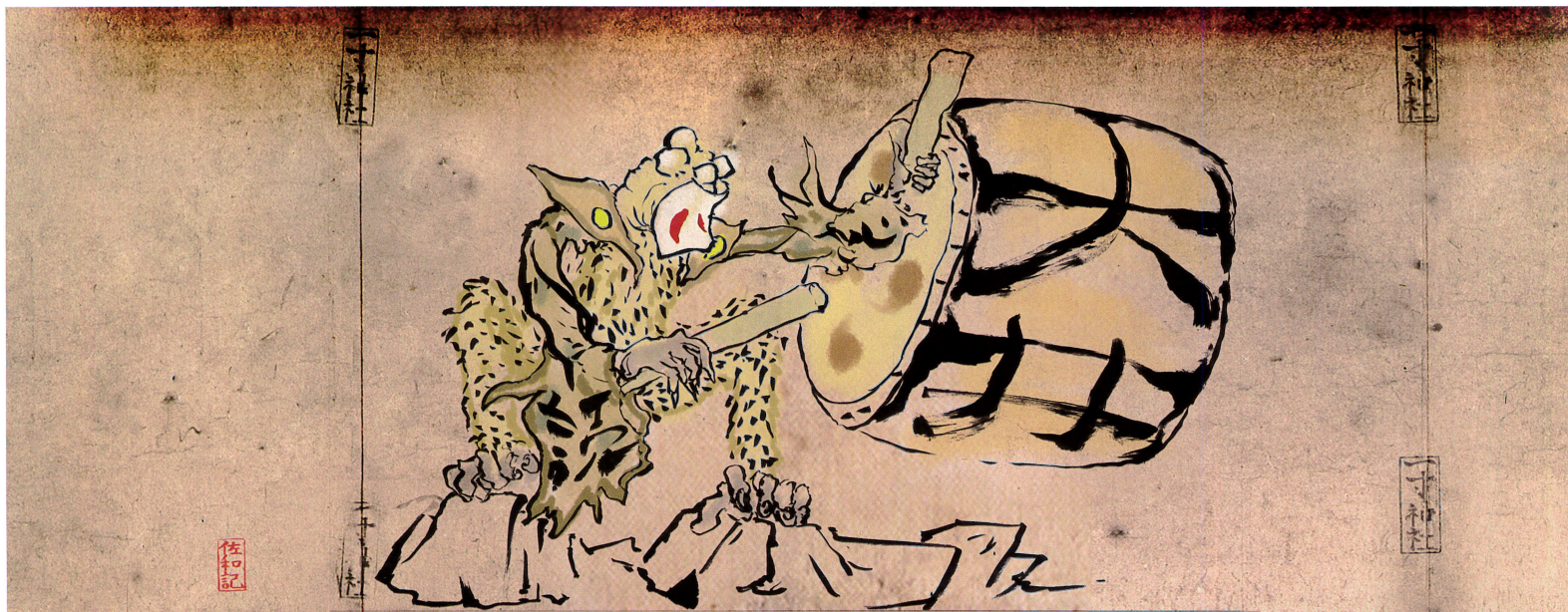
could make this cover story shorter than the cast of *Time Bandits* by alleging that everybody who touches Okami will fall deeply and madly in love with every inch of its celestial grandeur, and leave it at that. But I'll do my best to elaborate instead, cobbling together a description based on the Japanese language version that launched me into a dozen or so inner sermons to its creators. No measure of techno-babble applies in defining the visual composition at work here, except to describe how the artisans behind the vision achieved it, which Clover Studios' mother brain Atsushi Inaba so gracefully does in the interview that follows. Okami is a game that transcends technology. Like a fine painting, it should live on as an extraordinary piece of interactive art for generations to come (at least for the minority that still prefers the transcendent or meaningful for their daily console bread over virtual human killing-machines and ragdoll death physics).

The reality is that like so many games before it that should have blossomed into million-sellers, Okami will likely only be embraced by those of us who still play games to be taken away from the ills of the world rather than delivered into them. No skin off my back (since we have the privilege of making your magazine) but in this case I really and truly hope that Capcom is able to convince retailers that this is a game to be pushed in league with the bile that they shovel into their limited space like coal for the train to Hogwarts. Liken it to the fact that Ashlee Simpson sells more records than (insert the band of your choice here). In other words, be thankful that a game like Okami can still breach the belly of the beast at all.

Through the magic of Clover Studios we've explored what it's like to be a regular Joe (although I'm not sure how many of us would refute sexual advances to catch a *Giant Robo* rerun) transformed into a hulking, spandex-clad celluloid action hero in a diorama gone wild, but for their second act, Inaba and company have changed direction considerably, merging the essence of Wind Waker-like character design with third-person action, infused with celestial overtones that transform your TV screen into a living work of art-cum-giant DS. Through 18<sup>th</sup> century Hokusai-style Japanese woodblock art, housed within a kind of living cel-shading and accented by charcoal brush, they have created a gamescape like no other, and as Capcom so often has in the past, a game worthy of such visual bliss. I now officially forgive them for Beat Down and Final Fight Streetwise... Well, Streetwise may take





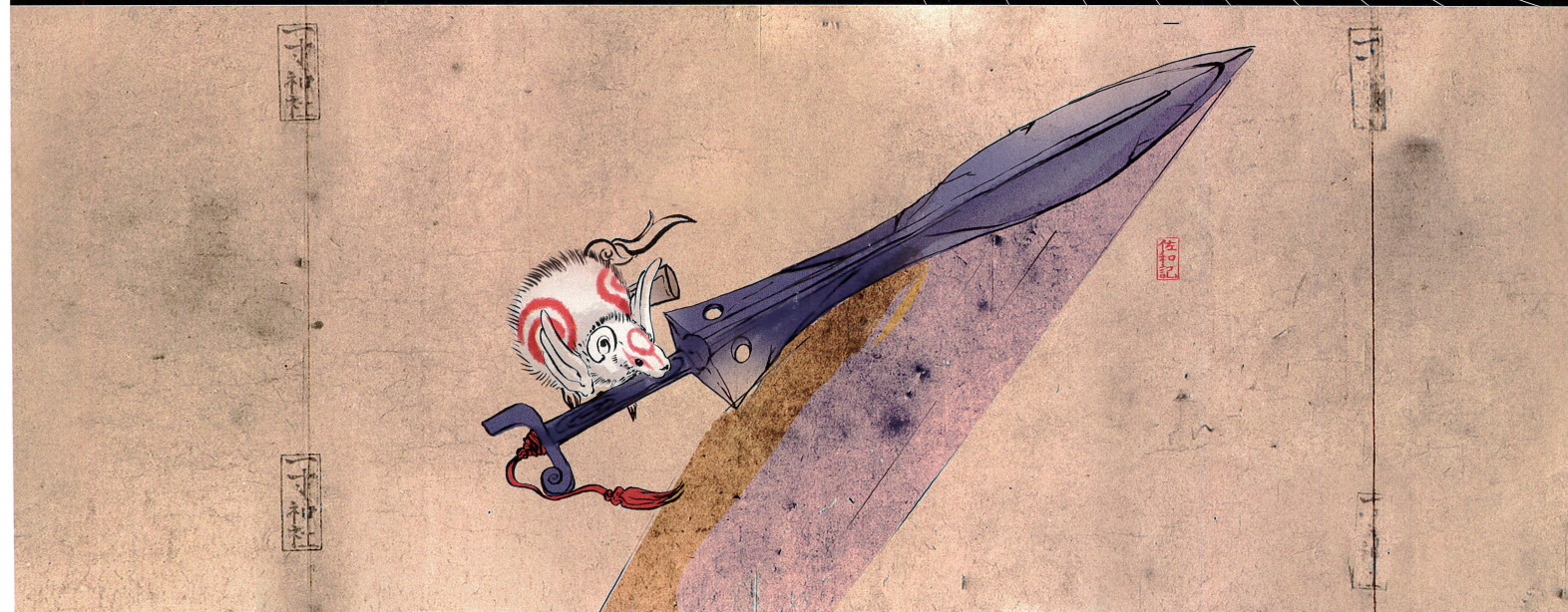


*“The action in Okami is nearly as spellbinding as the premise and art style.”*

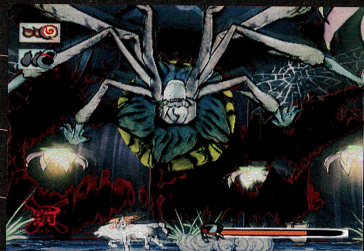
another Strider sequel but that’s another story. Playing the part of the sun goddess Amaterasu—a deity in wolf’s clothing sent to restore nature to a cursed world, who’s accompanied by a helpful sprite and adorned with angelic features—the gameplay is at times familiar, at times utterly unique, but always engaging to the point of reverence. The action in Okami is nearly as spellbinding as the premise and art style. Unlike most games featuring four-legged creatures, Okami is designed to take full advantage of Amaterasu’s nimble frame. Anyone who reveled in the high-speed gallop of Oddworld’s Stranger knows the feeling. At times the action is close quarters—fighting, conversing, or platforming—but the scope of the game and size of the regions is such that as areas are cleared of the poison mist that impedes your progress, Amaterasu can

run free—a wonderful, fluid feeling akin to carving a smooth arch on a wave or snowboard. Her attacks are also fluid and snappy via pinpoint control, evolving in concert with a host of mythological adversaries the likes that you have never seen or imagined. As Amaterasu assails each leg of the game, she gains power, as spiritual beings do, through amassing believers. So speaking with the wildly odd people strewn about the land and carrying out their wishes becomes essential to the game, along with restoring nature to each region by defeating the resident demons and healing the ecological conditions choking the topography. The more people that believe in Amaterasu, the stronger she becomes, but there are of course forces working against her. One of the game’s main beasts, for instance, Nue, becomes stronger with each sip of alcohol, while Ama no Jyaku has mind-reading

abilities used to ascertain what people want and then wreak havoc by doing the opposite. The evil in the game is more promiscuous than outright vicious and the sensibilities more like Kabuki Theatre than any worn-out plot devices that seem to grow on trees in America. The game really needs to be experienced to be appreciated, and I can’t wait to play it in English. One of the most interesting aspects of the game comes via the Celestial Brush: Early on, Amaterasu approaches a river too wide to cross and must consult the heavens for guidance. Assailing a nearby peak and connecting the dots of a constellation to form a celestial dragon, she’s able to freeze and transform the landscape into parchment creating a canvas for us to paint our way across. Uses for the brush abound. During melee battle, while ramming a shielded enemy, you can freeze the action while the enemy is temporarily

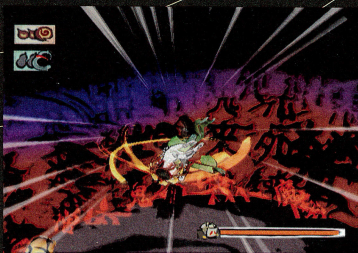
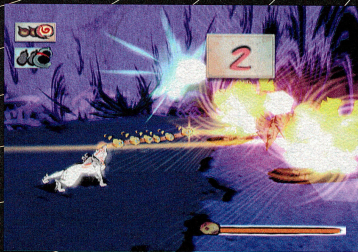






exposed and by brushing a stroke through it, split it in half. As Amaterasu becomes stronger the brush becomes increasingly powerful, to the point that you'll be able give life to dead forests and other unique devices we've been asked not to divulge. One thing's for sure: There's nothing quite like the sight of watching the color wash back into the land once an area is cleansed. Okami is truly a vision like no other.

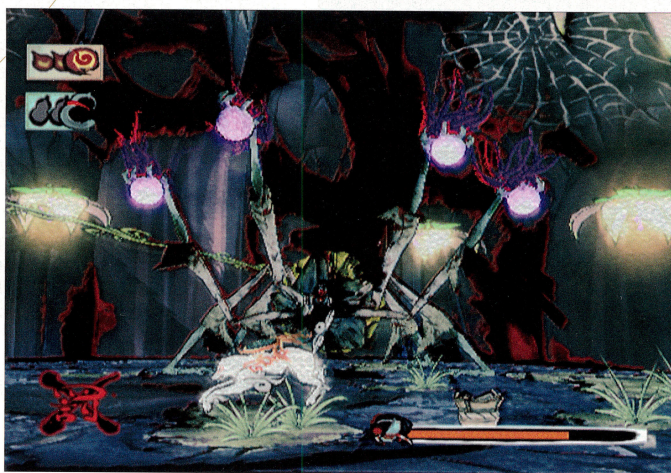
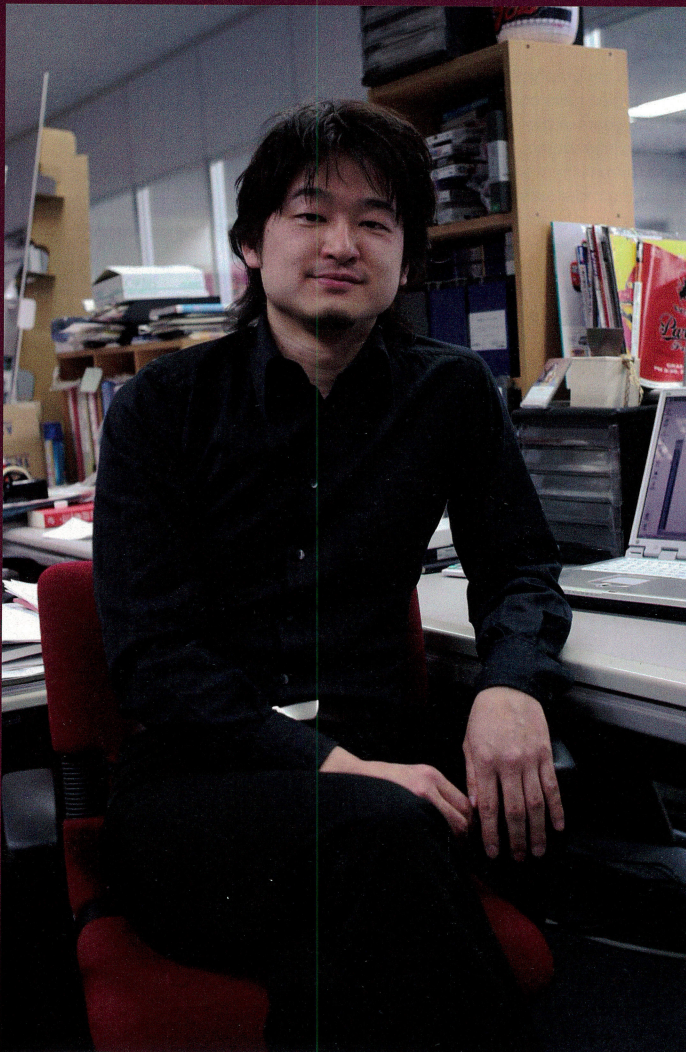
Besides the fact that you're running, jumping, fighting, and conversing, there's nothing ordinary about Okami. It is, like so few games of this peculiar era, truly unique—that rare gift like Wind Waker that will stay with you for years to come. "Generations" aren't defined by technology, they're defined by great games. So welcome to the next generation. Keep that PS2 plugged in.



## Interview

# Atsushi Inaba

Clover Studio's President and CEO



**What motivated you to design a game in which the player acts as and controls a god to restore nature to a dying planet? (Magnificent by the way.)**

**Atsushi Inaba:** This project actually started off with the hook of portraying Mother Nature in all its grandeur. But to get the visual style and gameplay aspects to where they are now, it required a lot of serious trial and error. Once we decided on the current style, a game design proposal was brought up that had the player restoring color to a world robbed of life. But even then, we felt it was lacking that special spark to make it work. So we came up with the Celestial Brush, and from there everything came together nicely. Although not everything was decided from the very beginning, the original intent of the game made it into the final design.

**How did you arrive at this particular art-style for Okami and what is the story behind it? Was there much trial and error?**

With the original concept being a portrayal of Mother Nature in all its grandeur, we experimented with photo-realistic graphics. However with the limits of the current generation of hardware, it prohibited us from reproducing the quality of graphics we were aiming for. But rather than being discouraged and giving up, we started experimenting with other ways to illustrate the beauty of nature. During this process, one of the designers decided to try drawing the main character, Amaterasu, with a sumie (charcoal) calligraphy brush. Although the person who drew it was probably doodling, when others saw it they said, "Wouldn't it be great if we could get something like that moving in 3D?" So we immediately started experimenting with this new look. We were able to knock out a running prototype in an amazingly short amount of time, and everyone on the team was extremely excited about the unique and fun visual style.

Compared to Okami's current state, the original prototype was extremely simple and plain, but the basic fundamentals haven't changed at all since then. You could say it didn't take much consideration to decide on the visual style for the game, but it was a series of coincidences and circumstances that led us to that end. Ironically, if the PlayStation2 hardware had been much more powerful, we may not have ever come up with the current visual style of Okami. All in all, I think that the whole creative process is what makes



creating games like this so much fun.

Once you decided on the brush technique how difficult was it to implement on the PS2? I've never seen anything quite like it, especially those moments when the color flows back into nature.

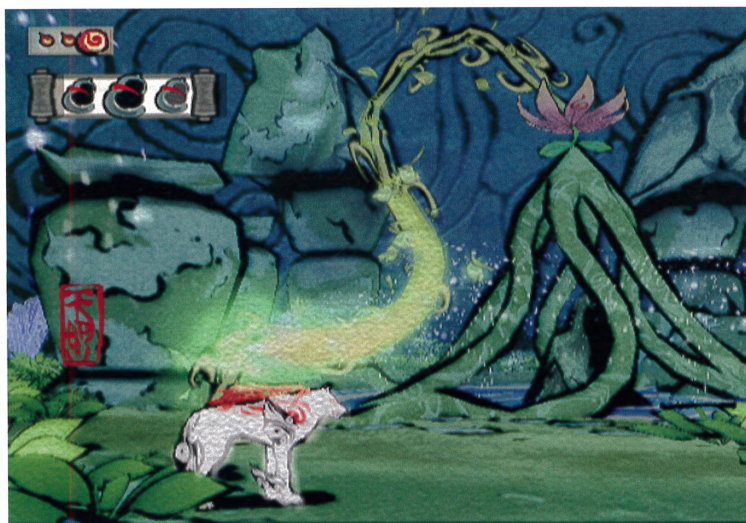
Actually I think our programmers and designers really had their work cut out for them, technologically speaking. Up until now the team has worked with rendering techniques to produce cutting-edge realistic 3D worlds, so the visual style of Okami has been a brand new experience for them. Since this is new territory for everyone involved, there was much more trial and error than usual. That being said, programming the rendering engine wasn't the most difficult task, it was establishing the look of the game. Fortunately with Okami, we were able to get past that hurdle very early in the process. Once we established the visual style, the rest fell into place and the only thing left to do was let the designers believe in their own instincts and make the game better and better.

The end result is one that transcends technology. Okami is more artistic and

beautiful than anything we've seen on next generation console. Do you see yourself continuing to pioneer new art techniques rather than utilize conventional CG graphics?

I heard this many times at last year's E3. I think the graphics in Okami are top-notch, but it isn't something that people have never seen before. Of course, this type of art style becomes innovative when it takes the form of a moving and breathing 3D game, but we've simply translated an existing visual style seen in other artistic mediums, including traditional Japanese paintings.

Computer graphics and rendering technologies have come a long way over the years in the pursuit of creating more realistic visuals. But instead of going for realism, we are aiming to create something more artistic. In the future, if a game requires beautiful graphics, I will do my best to make them look as good as possible. But at the same time I don't think that's necessarily a requirement for game development. If a game isn't fun, then the graphics, no matter how beautiful, mean nothing. Humans are creatures of luxury, and our eyes gravitate to what looks the best. This applies to practically every aspect of our lives, not just video game



graphics. What I am trying to say is that games aren't merely about graphics, nor are they merely about gameplay. They both go hand in hand in order to create an entertaining experience.

Could this technique be normal mapped? That would certainly look astonishing.

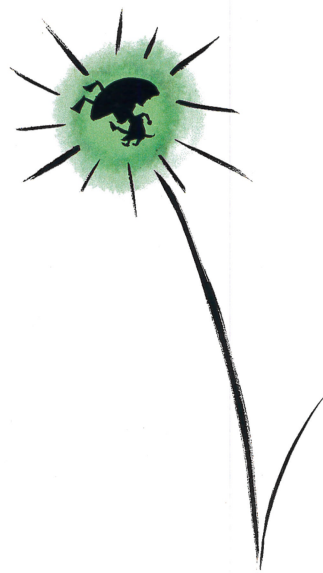
That's a good question. The advantage of normal mapping is getting the most realistic light, shadows and modeling in real-time while using the least amount of processor power. But unless we try this on Okami, I have no idea how it would turn out. CG graphic technology keeps advancing towards more and more photo-realism, but the real test is up to the designers and creators to put that technology to good use.

I like how the celestial brush allows the player to act as a deity in the game. Was this technique inspired by the DS in any way or is it more a product of the game's spiritual side?

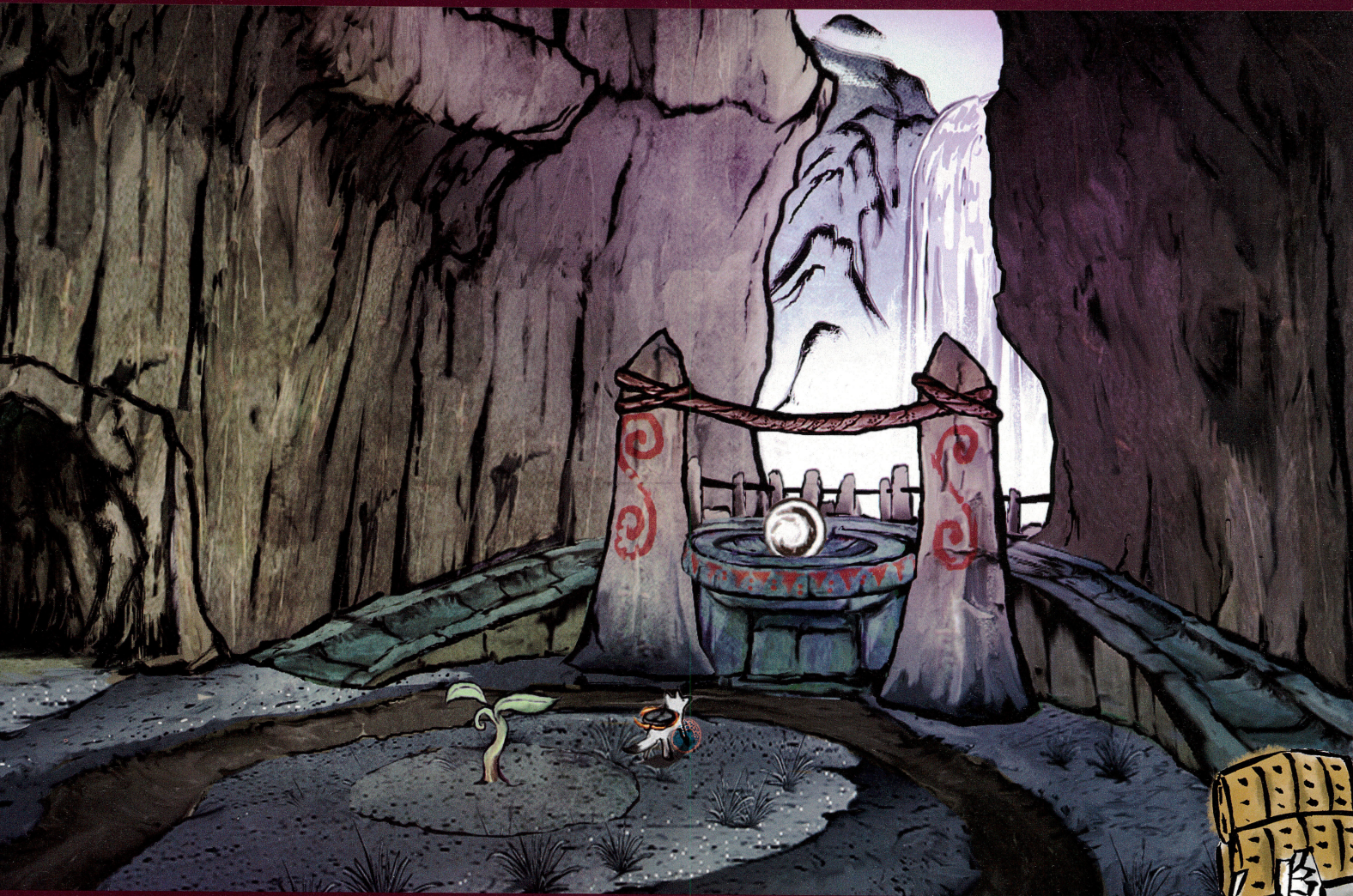
Actually this technique came from exploring different gameplay possibilities.

*"Humans are creatures of luxury, and our eyes gravitate to what looks the best. This applies to practically every aspect of our lives..."*

~Atsushi Inaba







Once we had the visual style set, we took a world that looks like it was drawn with a brush and let the player use this tool to draw on it. Utilizing the brush stops time and allows you to use the godly powers to interact with the environment that surrounds you. This really looks and feels akin to god-like superpowers and it fits in well with the premise of the game.

There was no inspiration taken from the Nintendo DS touch screen. All that aside, I am extremely excited about the emphasis put on the innovative aspects of the user-interface with Nintendo's Revolution hardware, etc. The standard controller has been around for 20 years, give or take, and people have grown comfortable and complacent. It's very exciting that Nintendo, the company that made the "d-pad and button" controller so common with the NES, is now changing how we interact with games.

**What types of challenges are associated with designing a game around a four-legged creature?**

The amazing staff we have working on this game, who've also worked on other top-notch action titles, have learned all there is to know about four-legged animals. The end result is not only having controls that are very natural and intuitive, but the player will also feel like they are this quick, agile beast. Amaterasu is at times loveable, brave, daring, hero-like, and so much more. With the intuitiveness and smoothness of Amaterasu's controls, players will become naturally attached to her as they become the character.

**What led to the sun god taking the shape of a wolf?**

Since the concept of the game is portraying Mother Nature, we decided that in order to take advantage of this theme, a spry and energetic wolf would be the best way to bring the world to life. In Japan, wolves no longer exist in the wild and it is said that they are the servants of the gods, making it the perfect character for the game. Its similarity to dogs made it ideal to convey a wide range of reactions and emotions. This character is more

than capable of being loveable, showing emotion and strength when needed, so players should have no trouble growing attached to the animal. I hope that players around the world get to see this game and find it as cool and beautiful as we do.

**As spiritual as the game is, it also seems to have a comic-book-like sense about it, expressed in the many colorful characters throughout. While the version I played was in Japanese is this a fair assumption?**

You are very correct in your observation. The world of Okami is not a dark and dreary one. Despite the fact that Yamatano Orochi, the giant creature, has enveloped the world in darkness, the people of the world continue to do their best to go on living, keeping their chins as high as they can. All of the characters that appear in the game have very unique, distinct personalities which emanate the comic book sensibilities.

**There is obviously a rich story here, along with exploration, real-time player interaction, platforming, and fighting—**





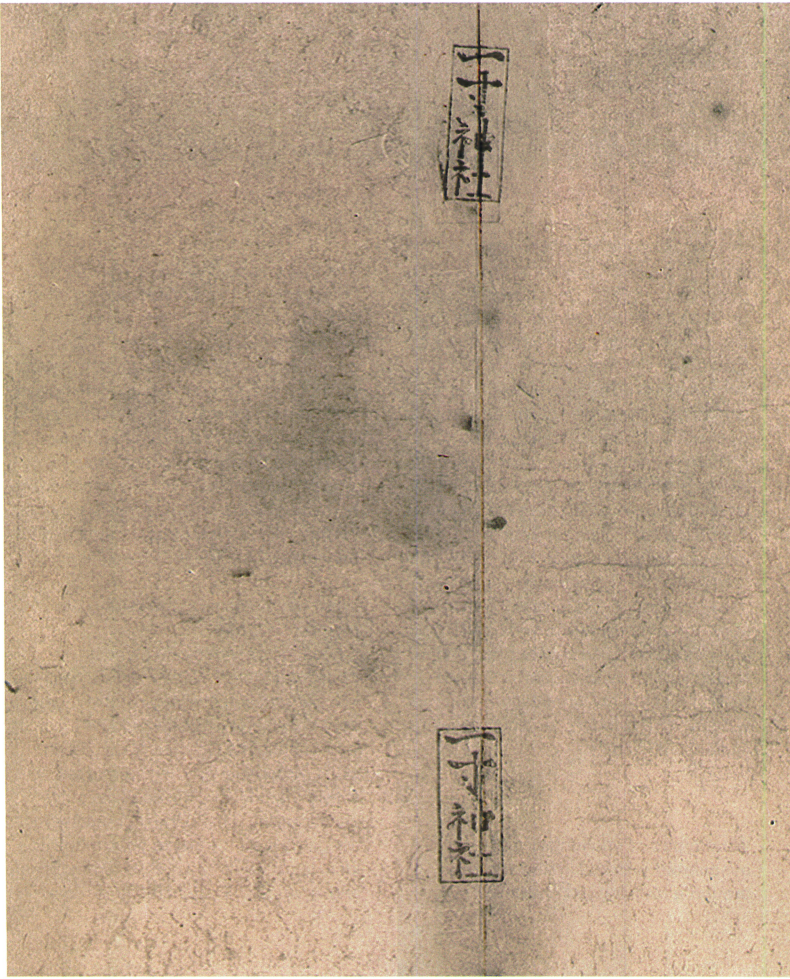


*“As a form of expression, video games are very powerful and I think there is still a lot of territory left to be explored. But at the same time the current market is very unbalanced...”*

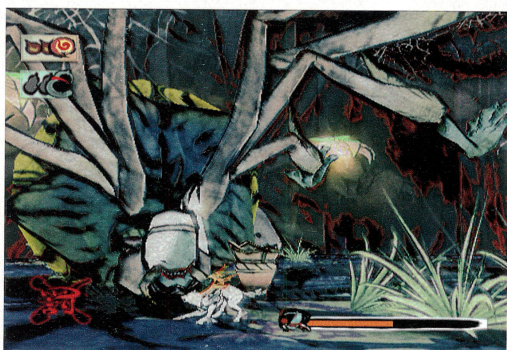
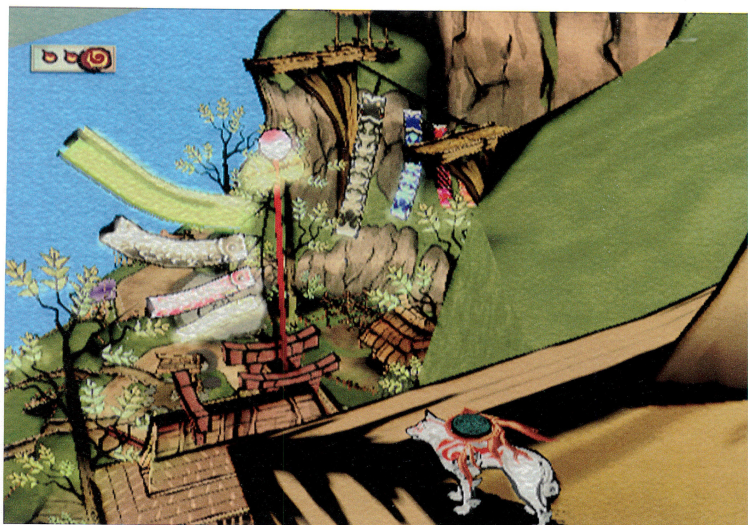
~Atsushi Inaba

again with the player interacting in real-time. At its core, how would you sum up or categorize Okami? It seems to transcend being designated as anything traditional. Do you feel that we have finally entered an era where games should be considered as dramatic works of interactive art and expression rather than designated as a certain type?

I am often asked what genre or category Okami falls into, and every single time I have trouble answering. It's difficult because I have to use existing genres to explain the gameplay. Even though this may be the easiest way to understand, it doesn't really do the core gameplay justice. Normally when we start to make







Okami's landscapes demand frequent stops to soak in the grandeur.

something new, we don't begin with the kind of genre we want the game to be in, so trying to stick a "genre" label on it can be pretty limiting. Whatever happens, I am sure everyone will evaluate it on its own merits and I would be extremely happy if Okami influences other games in a meaningful way.

As a form of expression, video games are very powerful and I think there is still a lot of territory left to be explored. But at the same time the current market is very unbalanced, leaning heavily towards only a few specific genres. It is this trend that has stifled some of this experimentation and exploration. If we had been chasing whatever was the "hot" genre of the moment (following the ideology of making whatever sells), then Okami would have never come about. But we aren't in a pursuit of "art" for the sake of art, either. Rather, we feel we are constantly trying to make things that are fun. I am very happy to see video games become more and more prominent in our societies, but I feel we mustn't forget why they exist in the first place.

**Now that you've (once again) created something completely original and innovative, are you more excited about moving to the next project or into developing a next-gen sequel (and perhaps other related media) for Okami?**

I don't want to make games based on a plan for creating sequels. So, I have decided to wait until after the game has been released to consider whether to make an Okami sequel. Although, I would like to continue creating new intellectual properties that go on to receive high acclaim.

**The Viewtiful Joe anime has been extremely successful in the States on TV and the DVD will surely be well received (it's nominated for several awards in our anime year in review). Do you have similar plans for Okami such as an anime? Will we be seeing additional Viewtiful Joe merchandise such as action figures etc.? Was he as well received in Japan?**

Right now I am not sure how things will play out for Okami. I would love to see Amaterasu, and the other characters from the game, in an anime series. It really all depends on the public's reception of it. So I can't say anything else until the game comes out.

Regarding the Viewtiful Joe anime series, it is actually more popular in the US than in Japan. I am very pleased that the series is making strides in America and that it has received such praise.

**What about a next gen Viewtiful Joe? As the last beacon of hope for 2D he must march on! (I know you cannot comment, but can we get a hint?)**

I too would like to see the Viewtiful Joe series running on a next-gen console and I'd like to make it happen. If there were to be another sequel, I would probably start over from scratch. However, there would be no guarantee it would end up as a 2D title.

With any hardware, including the next-gen systems, I try to not let the console dictate the type of game we should develop. But rather, determine the kind of game we're going to make and decide which hardware is best suited for that.

**Is there anything we have missed that you would like to convey about Okami?**

Okami is truly a fun game. I am sure that once players get a chance to spend some time with it, they will have a very fun and satisfying gaming experience. It lets you appreciate natural beauty beyond what surrounds us in this world. There aren't many games out there like this. I highly recommend you give Okami a try! **play**





System(s)	Xbox 360	Publisher	Konami
Developer	Yuke's Entertainment	Available	Spring 2006

# RumbleRoses XX

Girl Fight

words Greg Orlando

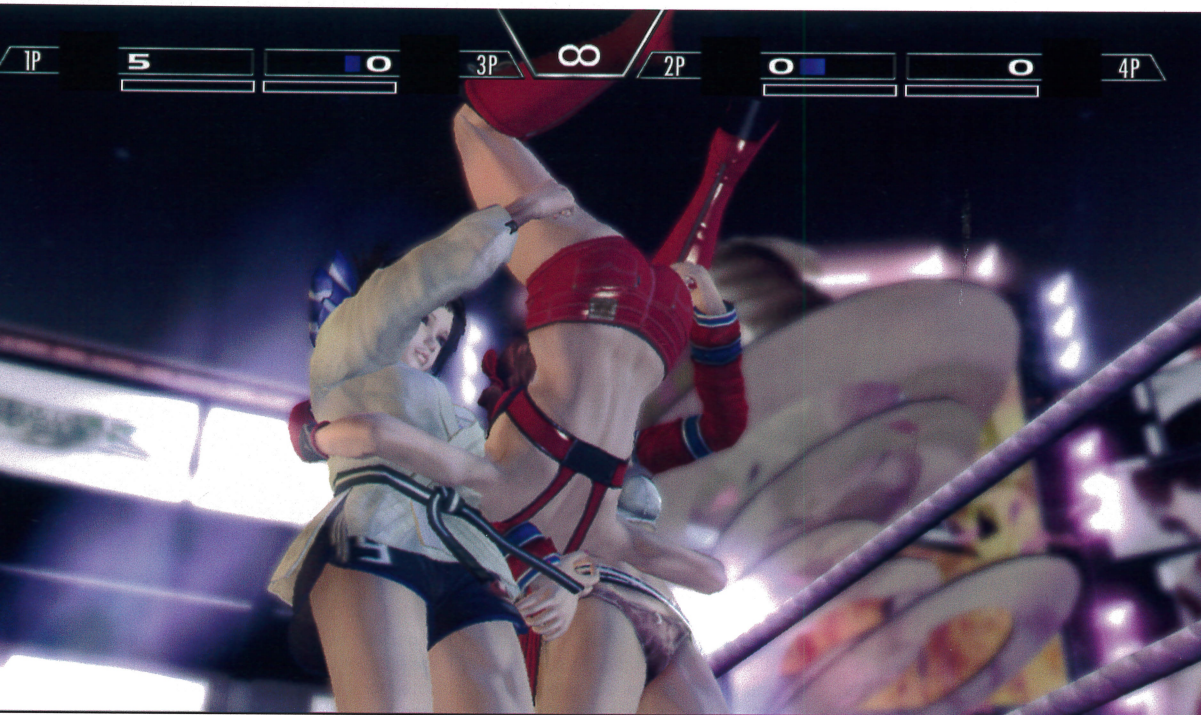
Historians in the not-too-distant future will more or less agree that it all went to pot around the time Bondage Clown made his debut in the female-centric wrestling game Rumble Roses XX. Clad in leather pants, shirtless, and on his hands and knees, Clown serves as a fine reminder to stay in school, to study—hard, to not smoke the crack cocaine, and certainly not to get a job as someone's footstool.

Clown is ridden to the ring by two buxom female wrestlers who, upon their dismount from his back, whip him as if he was, say, an S-and-M prop in a very weird entrance video. Historians will no doubt note Rumble Roses XX walked a very fine line in some of its choices; completely obliterated it in a mad dash to make the Xbox 360's first wrestling game also its most, among other things, interesting; and finally paved over it so no one might accurately discover where it had been placed.

XX picks up where 2004's PlayStation 2-exclusive Rumble Roses left off. The game, created by Yuke's and Konami offered an alternative view of the rough-and-tumble world of pro wrestling by presenting an all-female cast in various states of dishabille. Wrestlers in Roses were plucked like flowers from all the major female professions: twisted but sexy nurse, disobedient and willful schoolgirl, sassy robot, cowgirl, and bondage queen. Players guided their champion through a series of one-on-one matches with the Roses' championship as the ultimate goal.







"Detailed wrestler entrances sport explosions, loud music, and expansive choreography, adding a theatrical aspect to the proceedings."

The results were mixed. Roses certainly was pretty to look at, but its gameplay proved to be flawed. Konami had hyped the game's "mad mud" matches extensively, but these turned out to be nothing more than ordinary bouts fought in a brown morass. More to the point, the game lacked options. Wrestlers could not be customized in any way and players' choices as far as match types were boiled down to take it or leave it. The wrestling itself was solid, but still suffered due to a limited repertoire for the grapplers and a series of special attacks that took control away from players, turning them from active participants into spectators while a video showed the effects of the moves in question.

"All the comments and problems you had with the first game, consider them fixed," the game's producer Akari Uchida says through a translator. It's a bold statement, but Uchida never shies away from those. He's been outspoken enough to poke fun at rival video games; the first Roses was preceded by a trailer featuring a young woman hucking a volleyball at a camera—a not-too-subtle parodying

of Tecmo's *Dead or Alive Xtreme Beach Volleyball*. Nor is he afraid to take issue with the way his game was originally portrayed as a catfighting-heavy guy's game. "It's not like something you can pick up at a gas station," he says about his new game.

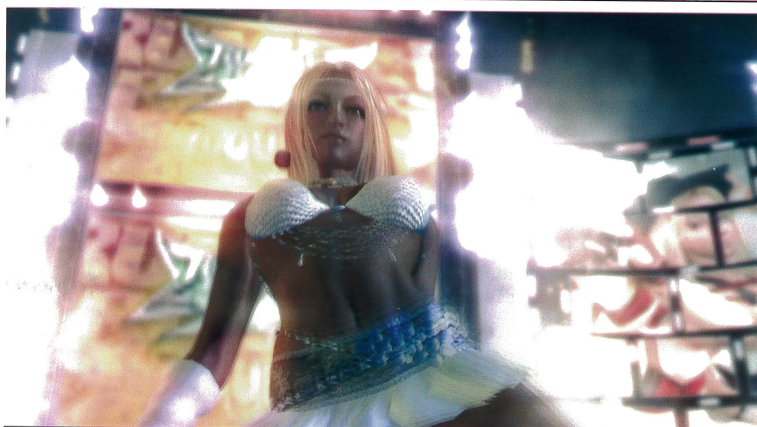
With *XX*, Uchida certainly has addressed many issues from the original *Roses*. The game now allows for tag team matches. Four-player online action has been added. Customization of characters is now possible, with Uchida boasting that when you make a character in other games "You almost always end up with a monster. In our game, you always create a babe." Move sets for the wrestlers have been expanded, new characters added, and a new mechanic allows the game's competitors to evolve into superstars, thus gaining new moves.

The new *Roses* outdoes its predecessor in terms of beauty. Running on an Xbox development kit, the game proves to be almost stunning. Detailed wrestler entrances sport explosions, loud music, and expansive choreography, adding a theatrical aspect to the

proceedings. The animated crowds appear as some of the best in the whole of video games. Wrestlers' animations have been suitably smoothed; there's little of the robotic shuffle of the first *Roses*, even when the gait applies to the mechanical grappler Lady Subsistence X.

Wrestlers wriggle out of full nelson holds, drop to the ground at the feet of their enemies, and launch powerful kicks

Two of the best reasons so far to own an Xbox 360.







to the head from the canvas. They'll perform flips over a foe's shoulder, allowing them to get off quick strikes from behind. Submission holds seem even more intricate than in the first *Roses*, with one wrestler picking up another, wrapping her in various ways, and then pushing, pulling, or dragging limbs to undoubtedly excruciating effect.

A new street fight mode moves the roses into uncharted waters. Here, the game shifts gears from wrestling to Tekken-esque brawling fought inside a fenced-in handball court. Pins and submissions become irrelevant, and the ultimate goal is to deplete an opponent's health and win two out of three fights. It might appear, at first glance, to be strictly throwaway, but the mode holds weight. Uchida notes that moves from *Roses'* street fighting were so well received and expertly done, they made it into the more traditional matches.

Tag-team bouts feature a personality dynamic forcing players not only to

choose their favorite characters, but the ones most suited for a partnership. Acting in concert with one another, two teammates will be able to perform powerful and elaborate combination attacks such as double suplexes. Some teams, however, will not gel. A team member might hate her partner enough to sit idly by while she's being pinned. Worse, a team could fracture with one wrestler simply exiting the arena during a match. Alliances can shift during the course of a match, too, and it will be possible to, say, piss off an ally by hitting her—accidentally or otherwise.

Uchida notes much of what happens in *XX* is fluid. Use a move repeatedly during fights and its effect will become more pronounced—to the point where players can develop second finishing moves for their chosen warrior. The same applies to certain skills, with wrestlers possibly becoming more adept at reversing holds or agile in terms of their walking and dashing.

### Dance The Samba With Marine Gift!

Rumble Roses *XX's* new "queen's match" pits two warriors against one another, with the loser being made to suck down a huge plate of embarrassment. Before such matches, a set of conditions can be selected for the post-fight humiliation. Producer Akari Uchida chose to demonstrate the mode by selecting "dance the samba with marine gift," and allowing two women to go at it, with loser cowgirl Dixie Clemets indeed shaking it without intent to break it wearing a sea-themed outfit.

Gives a whole new meaning to the phrase special moves.



Customization allows players to augment and reduce their characters in dramatic and dramatically silly ways. It's possible to turn, say, schoolgirl Candy Cane into an exaggerated parody of a comic book heroine with oversized mammaries and sprawling hips. All physical choices will impact play, Uchida says. The eye candy may be impressive to gawk at, but it might not function beautifully in the ring.

There's more in the form of handicap matches and battle royales, and online play certainly will fill out the package quite nicely, pun most certainly intended. It's certainly all the adjectives most

applied to sequels: bigger, badder, better. Yet there must be a caveat empor tucked on for good measure. *Roses* sometimes proves too eager to emphasize the crotch and panty shot, it seems almost gleeful in allowing its characters to writhe on poles or grope themselves while prone on operating tables. At points, it's almost painful to watch an ass shot of the game's poster girl Reiko wearing a floss bikini and hunched over while she's pushing a mop around because she lost a "queen's match." Good taste may go down for the three-count here. And the historians may well have a point. **play**



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System(s) PlayStation 2

Publisher

Konami

Developer Konami

Available

March



# MGS3

## Subsistence

More of what you love

words Greg Orlando

**O**ld soldiers don't die, and neither do they fade away, especially when there are lucrative remakes to be had. Konami's grizzled warrior Snake gets a fresh daub of camouflage paint with the PlayStation 2 exclusive Metal Gear Solid 3: Subsistence, a reworked version of 2004's popular stealth action game Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater.

For those who missed Snake Eater, its

plot has the covert agent Snake dropped into the Soviet Union to recover a scientist. It takes place in 1964, after the United States and the U.S.S.R. cut a deal to remove Soviet missiles from Cuba, and the game fairly bathes itself in long-winded Cold War rhetoric.

As Snake, players must go it alone, creeping through jungles, swamps, and urban landscapes to find their target.

The game presented an interesting, if somewhat flawed, camouflage system wherein the hero could instantly change his facepaint and uniform to better conceal himself in different surroundings. Eater also presented an interesting series of close-quarter combat options in which Snake could use his survival skills to defeat enemies in hand-to-hand combat, knock them insensate, use them as bullet shields, or rough them up so as to pry information from them.

The game was hailed as a great



success. Its one great weakness was its camera, a third-person top-down atrocity that greatly hampered the game's stealth sequences. As it stood, the game's camera offered a limited view for the hero, requiring the need to shift into a first-person perspective to observe the surroundings. Players would then need to switch back to the default view to move until the next problem spot. Eater's camera was a throwback to earlier Metal Gear Solid games, and was due for an overhaul.

With Subsistence, the camera has been altered to great effect. Konami's dropped the camera so it follows Snake at a lower angle, allowing for more of the terrain to be seen. The camera is also by far more adjustable than its near-unyielding predecessor and Snake Eater as a whole improves noticeably because of the alteration.

Few would be sold on buying Snake Eater 3.5, now with new camera angles. So Konami wisely thought to sweeten the package with a series of new features to round out Subsistence. Versions of the MSX 2 titles Metal Gear and Metal Gear Solid 2: Solid Snake, neither of which was ever released in North America, are bundled here and serve nicely as sequels to Snake Eater.

An odd but endearing series of missions pitting Snake against the monkeys from Ape Escape have also been added, as has a brand-new duel mode. Duels are unlocked upon completion of the Snake Eater single-player adventure, and provide for battles against any of the game's major nemeses. A demo mode offers the opportunity to view the game's cinematics and is similarly unlocked after completion of the main game.

A series of game characters duck walking under cardboard boxes, a brief flash of cinematic spectacle shown at Konami press event, was enough to herald Subsistence's most important new feature. Icing comes in the form of online play, a first for the Metal Gear series. Subsistence supports eight players via the PlayStation 2's network adapter.

Five different online missions are included here. Sneaking contest requires one player to take the role of Snake and to pilfer an item being guarded by the opposition. Team death matches emphasize straightforward gunplay between rival forces. The rest of the online options include rescues (wherein dead players do not respawn, but rather become ghosts), captures, and free-for-

**“Konami wisely thought to sweeten the package with a series of new features to round out Subsistence...”**

all fragfests. Konami has already gone on record as saying it will incorporate maps from Snake Eater such as the Gorki Lab and Krasnogorje Mountain as well as adding new forest, city, factory, and slaughterhouse stages for online competitions.

For online play, Konami has stated it will offer all the elements included in Snake Eater: the close combat aspects,



### **Sneak, the gourmand**

One of Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater's most appetizing features (pardon the delicious pun) was its nutrition system. Alone and without resupply, the protagonist Snake had to make do with local flora and fauna. In short, his MREs (meals ready to eat) were snakes, frogs, and whatever else he could find. Going hungry meant Snake suffered a loss of stamina, which in turn hampered his ability to heal his wounds.



No way she gets that through security.



the weapons, and the alarm system. Some type of scoring system will rank players, with the most successful warriors able to select Snake or the series' other notable figures while the lesser players can only participate as generic soldiers. In addition, teams can be formed from the various factions in the Metal Gear Solid universe, among them the GRU, Ocelot unit, or KGB.

It wasn't possible to test Subsistence online; Konami's preview copy for the game was strictly an offline affair. This

might be a make-or-break deal for Subsistence; given the Snake Eater's overwhelming popularity (it sold 3.6 million copies worldwide), it remains questionable how many people will buy the game again. Online play could prove a great draw, but could easily be bungled by lag or even a poor online navigation system. Certainly it would be a cruel fate for Snake to suffer, and a horrible thing to consider online play might possibly replace the camera system as Metal Gear's new Achilles' Heel. **play**



System(s)	Xbox 360, Xbox, PS2, PC	Publisher	Ubisoft
Developer	Red Storm	Available	March



Tom Clancy's  
**Ghost Recon**  
**Advanced Warfighter**  
Almost as fun as the real thing

words Brady Fiechter



In the not-so-distant 2013, war's still a viable business, and since it's the future, business is as refined as ever: soldiers have become even more meticulously manufactured, the premier lot falling under the auspice of "advanced warfighter." Along with their progressive training, these newest of the new bad-asses carry a scary array of high-level technologies, from weapon systems to reconnaissance tools. It's fancy stuff, built to streamline an age-old task: kill the enemy. In Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter, the killing method is indeed more advanced than you might be used to in a typical war game, placing its brand of combat squarely in the command-based, tactical-heavy category. This is a game that can quickly turn away the uninitiated with its broad customization and complexities, while thrilling the player pining for its depths.

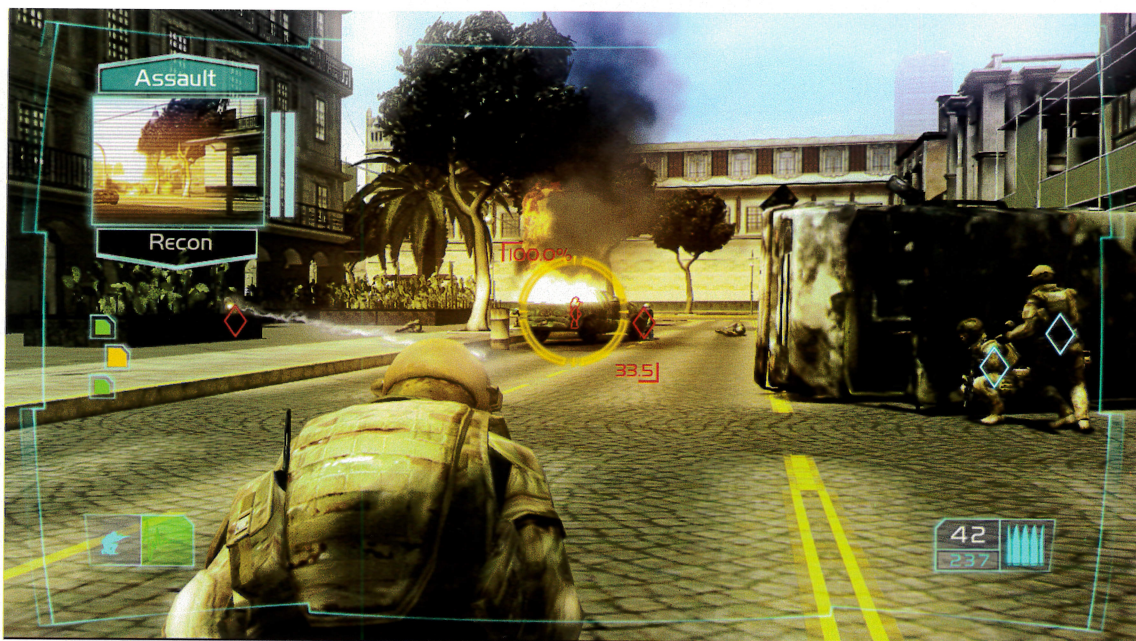
If you've played a Ghost Recon game, you're ready for this next-gen sequel. The basic gameplay structure has been beefed up more than dramatically rearranged, offering the kind of missions you'd expect in the genre: rescue comrades and important officials, destroy key sites and gather secret intel; here, it all takes place in Mexico City. The third-person perspective is balanced by an on-the-fly first-person option, joining the



other ostensibly minor details that begin to reveal more substantial consequence as the missions ramp up. The game is perhaps more forgiving than before to a player who's less interested in exploring the more dynamic gameplay functions, but the true reward definitely awaits the complete understanding of the tactical gameplay structure, which drives the multiplayer skirmishes.

The introduction of a cross-com system holds interesting prospects. As an extension of the central HUD, the cross cam further opens your view to the battlefield, allowing you to see through the eyes of your teammates and send out a drone that can explore anywhere on the battlefield in search of hot spots. Once the drone has been deployed, you can command its altitude in an effort to avoid being shot down in the thick of an enemy stronghold.

This series has gathered its most aggressive following as an online



destination, and Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter is out to take the legion of fans to a new level. The key to success: choices, choices and more choices, along with, of course, a distinct separation of personal styles and strategies once those choices have been made. You begin by picking from four classes—rifleman, marksman, grenadier, assault rifleman—which in turn determines everything from reload speeds and equipment capacity to accuracy and raw combat ability. Weapon structure is all over the map; outfitting your soldier has never been so specific to your strengths and weaknesses. The look of your soldier comes down to your personal creativity, drawn from an exhaustive create-a-character option. and the game modes themselves are also highly customizable. The multitude of maps are in place, but little of how you experience those war zones comes down to the rigid constraints of the game's designers. **play**

One of the few games you can call truly next-gen...

"...outfitting your soldier has never been so specific to your strengths and weaknesses..."







System(s)	PlayStation 2, Xbox	Publisher	Electronic Arts
Developer	Criterion	Available	February 27



"...though Black emphasizes careful play, it doesn't allow for its protagonist to sit still for long."



Seldom seen and much hyped, Black is the Bigfoot of video games. It debuted at the 2004 Electronic Entertainment Expo, where only a select few—17 game journalists, to be exact—saw the game in action. Since then, Electronic Arts and developer Criterion have kept a tight lid on this first-person shooter. Few screen shots for the game have leaked out. No one's been told the plot save for the fact it involves an American shooting his way through Eastern Europe.

The game's notoriety has spread nonetheless. Word of mouth fueled the intrigue for the game and, having teased game fans long enough, Electronic Arts finally saw fit to circulate a preview version of the game. A one-level preview. With all the contextual bits neatly excised.

Find the border and cross it. The preview offers no explanation for anything, does not even hint at an objective until the border is almost in sight. All that's apparent is the game's sharp beauty and its sense of foreboding. Players are dropped amid a tree-choked forest at night and are armed only with a pistol and

words Greg Orlando

a silencer. The silencer can be screwed on and removed with a press of the Xbox's "Y" button.

Non-descript enemies wear body armor. Multiple shots trigger some sort of silent alarm, and the game is rather unforgiving with its health packs. Shots to head are an elegant solution to the armor, and silenced shots are weak but sometimes preferable to alerting multiple guards. Weapons can be exchanged and grenades acquired; the preview version of the game features AK-47s and shotguns in addition to the pistol. Other weapons, such as rocket launchers, will be included in Black's final edition.

A well-defended border must be stormed. The approach to its guardposts is perilous, but can be assaulted from two directions. A road offers a more indirect route to the target, but it's fiercely patrolled by guards. The more direct path brings the protagonist right into the sightline of two guard towers. Explosive tanks, placed in true video game fashion near the towers, can be shot and the resultant blast offers an entrance through the border fence.



What's left of once whole pillars...And you thought Neo & Trinity left a mess...

The opposition stiffens once the perimeter has been breached, and Black shows off its graphical finery. Windows shatter and floors disintegrate under fire. It's possible to storm up a flight of stairs and shoot the floor out from an enemy. A barracks that offers shelter from gunfire rapidly becomes a deathtrap, and though Black emphasizes careful play, it doesn't allow for its protagonist to sit still for long.

As quickly as the preview begins, it ends. Crossing the barracks to the final fence ends the game, with only the memory of a fearsome and extended firefight survived by the barest of margins. And Black, as it has for two years now, remains an enigma. **play**



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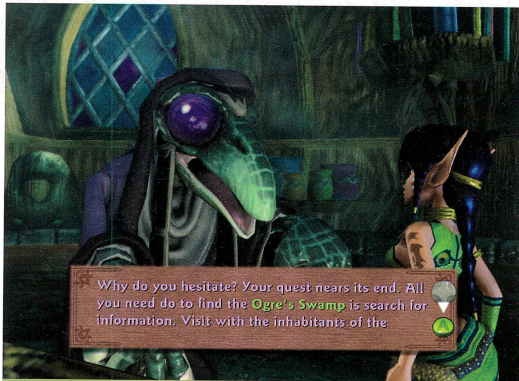


"...we're seeing a greater diversity of what players want from their gaming experience..."

Mark Stevenson, lead artist on Kameo

If we weren't happy with the final Kameo then we would have changed her 'til we were, but again, though I have to admit that the broad appeal issue does feature a little in the final result, as we were trying to find a final look for the character that sat comfortably with everyone we hoped the game would appeal to.

**Does it drive you mad that some people consider a 15-20 hour long game packed with layers of fantastic gameplay, co-op play, downloadable content, and vast replay value short? Not to mention the amazing new hub...**



**Be honest. Do UK gamers and press also harp on this, or is it a US thing?** I don't get that whole 'short' thing myself. If people are saying that it's too short then surely that's an indication that they enjoyed the game and were left wanting more, which is surely a good thing. Personally I'd rather have a game that I can play through in a reasonable amount of time and really enjoy the experience than some epic 40+ hour game where I'll give up and only see a fraction of the content. I can't really speak for the UK press on the issue but the playing field doesn't really seem to be level anyway

when things like this are being assessed. I've played games myself recently that have had massive review scores but offer no more main gameplay time than Kameo, but reviewers haven't raised this as an issue for these games so I don't really know why it's being made into such a big

deal for Kameo.

**There was a time when any Rare platformer, let alone one this excellent, would sell millions of copies. But now you're fighting against a press, public, and industry bent on realism over fantasy and violence and gunplay over gameplay. Have you thought about creating a mature-themed Rare epic? I mean look at God of War, it's essentially a big grand platformer only hardcore to the bone. Do you envision yourselves ever going there?**

I think it would be safe to say that the market has changed quite a bit in recent years and we're seeing a greater diversity of what players want from their gaming experience and we now have a market more broken up into different consumer groups. But the realism and violence camp only really represents a part of that overall audience and I'm sure there are still a lot of gamers out there who don't play these kinds of games because the content doesn't appeal to them or they are just too young for this kind of content,

and hopefully Kameo will prove to be a great title for this audience. Rare has already produced more mature content in the form of the Perfect Dark series so clearly we don't rule out the use of mature content in our games, but I don't think a shift of focus to only this kind of content would be a good thing for the industry as it will just serve to reduce the target audience further which is the opposite of what the 360 is about.

**So we've finally reached the point where all of your old projects are out the door and you've got a shiny new powerful console to help blaze a new trail. What will Rare do next? Moreover...How long will it take? Can you now create a Rare epic within a 2-3 year time-frame? Because we'd like at least 4 Rare games in this generation. Two teams two each... and make one Battletoads. You know you want to.** We'll do our best for you. I think that no one will argue that our timely delivery of not one but two awesome launch titles for the Xbox 360 speaks volumes. **play**

Kameo surveys the troll devastation







## Blazing Angels: Squadrons of WWII

<b>System(s)</b>	Xbox, Xbox 360	<b>Publisher</b>	Ubisoft
<b>Developer</b>	Ubisoft In-House	<b>Available</b>	March 7

Blazing Angels (especially on 360) is a WWII aficionado's ultimate shooter/simulation. The game looks and feels like the real thing with a comprehensive targeting and camera system, amazingly real city and seascapes and the sound effects to drive it all home. *DH*

## Far Cry Instincts Predator

<b>System(s)</b>	Xbox 360	<b>Publisher</b>	Ubisoft
<b>Developer</b>	Ubisoft	<b>Available</b>	March



Miss this fantastic first-person shooter on Xbox? That's a good thing, because now you can redeem your loss and bring the jungle smackdown in this 360 retooling. Most the changes will come in the form of the obvious visual brushes, but expect a few tweaks here and there and a more dedicated Live push. *BF*

## Tomb Raider Legends



<b>System(s)</b>	PS2, Xbox, Xbox 360	<b>Publisher</b>	Eidos
<b>Developer</b>	Crystal Dynamics	<b>Available</b>	April

It doesn't come as a shock, but playing is believing and if the most recent Legends demo is any indication, Tomb Raider is on the verge of a major, and much needed rebirth. This may also be Crystal's finest game. Let's hope the April date holds with 360 in the mix. *DH*



## LOTR: The Battle For Middle Earth

<b>System(s)</b>	Xbox 360	<b>Publisher</b>	EA
<b>Developer</b>	EA	<b>Available</b>	March

Redesigned from the PC counterpart, this entry in the Lord of the Rings game pantheon eschews the character-based action we've become accustomed to on console for the army-controlled battles of real-time strategy. One of the central development goals is to realize Middle Earth as more of a livable space than a mere static backdrop for the strategy. *BF*

## Mark Ecko's Getting Up



<b>System(s)</b>	Xbox, PS2, PC	<b>Publisher</b>	Atari
<b>Developer</b>	Atari Games	<b>Available</b>	February

By the numbers old action in and under the big city with frequent stops to awkwardly spray your name or beat on rival taggers and thugs... So far I'm just not feelin' ME's game debut. Hope there's more to it. Embargo impedes going any further so I've just nicked it. *DH*







## Moto GP 2006

<b>System(s)</b>	Xbox 360	<b>Publisher</b>	THQ
<b>Developer</b>	Climax	<b>Available</b>	June

GP racing couldn't look any more realistic—the visuals on display are veritable perfection—and Climax's 360 version for 2006 controls like a dream, especially in the new Extreme Mode set in cities around each GP track where you can really let loose. *DH*

## Drakengard 2

<b>System(s)</b>	PlayStation 2	<b>Publisher</b>	Ubisoft
<b>Developer</b>	Square Enix	<b>Available</b>	March



Drakengard 2 takes place in the same world explored in the first game, playing off similar themes and gameplay devices. A new cast of faces take over the plot, continuing the battle over air and on ground. The obvious sequel shakeup covers areas like item management and upgrades. *BF*

## State of Emergency 2

<b>System(s)</b>	PlayStation 2	<b>Publisher</b>	SouthPeak
<b>Developer</b>	DC Studios	<b>Available</b>	February



Libra's chopped off her hair, Spanky's lost a few pounds and the freedom force marches on...only this time there's gang control, vehicles, interrogation and so on. SoE 2 is actually nothing like SoE. The exaggeration is gone and replaced with realism, more story, etc. AI needs work and I miss the old Libra. We'll see. *DH*



## Top Spin 2

<b>System(s)</b>	Xbox360	<b>Publisher</b>	2K Games
<b>Developer</b>	Indie Built	<b>Available</b>	April

Currently TS 2 has problems. You can't see the ball, the AI is set on impossible; the crowd gives standing ovations for errors, the models aren't up to 360 par, and the courts and crowd (standing ovations on errors?) are nothing special. There's much work to be done. *DH*

## Dreamfall

<b>System(s)</b>	Xbox, PC	<b>Publisher</b>	Funcom
<b>Developer</b>	Aspyr Media	<b>Available</b>	Spring



Full-blown adventure games don't exist much anymore, which makes Dreamfall, at least on its ambitious premise, worth attention. The game continues the story of The Longest Journey, dealing with issues of faith and personal journey. The developers joke about their obsession to detail getting the best of them. Obsess away... *BF*



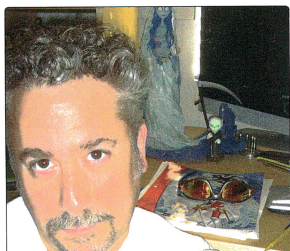
## Burnout Revenge

<b>System(s)</b>	Xbox360	<b>Publisher</b>	EA
<b>Developer</b>	Criterion	<b>Available</b>	March

Burnout Revenge is being rebuilt for the Xbox 360: more traffic, more effects, more detail, more everything. This "more" approach spills heavily into the online arena, where you can get into new features like Live Revenge and a replay feature, which pulls up wrecks you've saved from previous races. *BF*



play  
Staff "Round-up"



**Dave Halverson**  
Editor in Chief

**Favorite genres:** Platformers, adventure, motocross, action-RPGs, 2D  
**Now playing:** Tomb Raider Legend, Mega Man X, Maverick Hunter, Moto GP 2006  
**Most Anticipated Games 2006:** The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess, Extreme Ghosts 'n' Ghosts

Dave can't seem to let go of the past or get enough of the future, causing a strange genetic abnormality to take place. Immune to the burden of sleep or adulthood, E Storm plays games new and old, both console and handheld by day, and fades away into any number of strange Japanese cartoons by night, leaving only time to write it all down and ponder the true meaning of the universe.

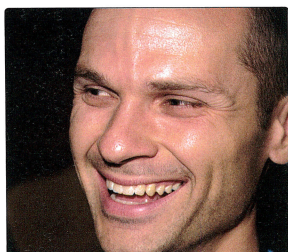


**Nick Des Barres**  
Japan Editor

**Favorite genres:** RPGs, Action, Adventure, Fighting, Shooters  
**Now playing:** Kingdom Hearts II  
**Most Anticipated Games 2006:** Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess, Okami

Nick fondly remembers the first video game he ever played: Trojan, by Capcom, on the NES. He wishes he could claim even earlier gaming-roots, and the modern-day Nick would probably be affronted by the reference to "Trojan" and insist it be called "Tatakai No Banka (Elegy For Battle)," but the fact remains that he's been playing games daily for nearly twenty years and writing about them for twelve. He tends to gravitate towards the classic genres of his youth: RPGs, action/adventure, shooting.

Grandia III 038  
Fight Night Round 3 040  
24 041  
Full Auto 042  
Ape Escape 3 042  
Dead or Alive 4 043  
MS Saga 043



**Brady Fiechter**  
Executive Editor

**Favorite genres:** Adventure, first-person shooters, action, RPGs  
**Now playing:** Mario Kart DS  
**Most Anticipated Games 2006:** RE 5, The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess

Under constant pressure by a friend to flee the country and study the ways of the Taoist, Brady continues to balk, proclaiming that his spiritual journey lies in movies and games. He finds joyful satisfaction in killing things, namely zombies and soldiers and evil creatures, which tend to pop up in some of his favorite genres.



**Casey Loe**  
Contributing Editor

**Favorite genres:** RPGs, Action,  
**Now playing:** Classified  
**Most Anticipated Games 2006:** Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess, Phantasy Star Universe (PS2)

Casey had a promising as a video game journalist a decade ago, but booze, pills, and his all-consuming hatred of Final Fantasy VIII ultimately left him incomprehensible and unemployable. After spending eight years on the street ranting about Squall Leonhart to winos, schizophrenics, and syphilitic prostitutes, Casey has tricked an old friend into paying him to complain about video games in a national video game magazine.

TOCA Race Driver 3 044  
Teen Titans 064  
Rogue Galaxy 058  
[eM] -eNCHANT arM- 060



**Greg Orlando**  
Associate Editor

**Favorite genres:** RPGs, action, adventure, fighting, wrestling  
**Now playing:** Fight Night Round 3  
**Most Anticipated Game 2006:** RE 5, Dimitri

Of Greg Orlando, historians agree that he is, without question, the finest human being to be mentioned in this sentence. A veteran of the Cola Wars thrice decorated, Orlando understands the universe's great solitary truth: If the mule don't kick, you know the mule don't ride. He is currently missing, presumed pantsless...



**Eric Patterson**  
Contributing Editor

**Favorite genres:** Survival Horror, puzzle, music + Bemani, 2D SNK fighters  
**Now playing:** Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney  
**Most Anticipated Games 2006:** Phantasy Star Universe (PS2), RE5

Eric's addition to the staff greatly excited the other writers, as now they can give him all of the fruity games to cover. You really do have to wonder about a guy, though, when half his game shelf is cutesy Japanese games, and the other half blood-drenched horror titles.

# Reviews

March 2006



**Mike Griffin**  
PC Editor

**Favorite genres:** MMORPGs, first-person shooters, action-adventure  
**Now playing:** Battlefield 2  
**Most Anticipated Games 2006:** SiN Episodes Emergence, Huxley

Even as a wee lad playing Zaxxon on Coleco, the technology and artistry of game design has always fascinated Mike. He thinks some games are timeless in that respect, whether 2D, 3D, flat-shaded or bump mapped. Mike's goal is to equip the readers with accurate information, so that limited funds and time can be put to good use.



**Michael Hobbs**  
Art Director

**Favorite genres:** Action, racing, adventure, alternative, shooters  
**Now playing:** Super Princess Peach  
**Most Anticipated Games 2006:** First party Revolution games--)

A gamer since Space Invaders, Michael has a soft spot for 2D shooters and other games that directly engage the player. Nintendo certainly ranks high on his list of ideal developers. He's also recently become addicted to RC sailplane flying, so you'll actually find him outside now, absorbing the sun's photons.

play magazine  
**GAME of the MONTH**  
Grandia III  
38  
GameArts has found the right tone with Grandia III, and delivered a story that's rich on substance as well as charm.

## Our rating system

Our scores represent both a game's technical merits and our personal opinions based on our expertise within each genre, of which the numbers alone do not necessarily tell the whole story. A perfect 10 represents a game that is flawless in the reviewer's opinion. Such a high standard means that 10s will be incredibly rare, but when it happens, it symbolizes that this game is the best of the best, a modern classic.

- 10...Perfect
- 9...Extraordinary
- 8...Great
- 7...Good
- 6...Decent
- 5...Average
- 4...Below average
- 3...Poor
- 2...Bad
- 1...Terrible



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System(s)	PlayStation 2	Publisher	Square-Enix	Available	February 14
Developer	GameArts	Online	NA	ESRB Rating	T

# GRANDIA III

Mass extinction, in a heartwarming sort of way

**T**he original Saturn version of Grandia was a revelation to me. In a time when RPGs were transitioning from the vapid stories of 16-bit games to the brooding, self-important stories that still abound today, Grandia delivered a tale that was charming, heartfelt and completely without pretension. (The badly acted, two year-late US version was, sadly, a different story.)

words Casey Loe

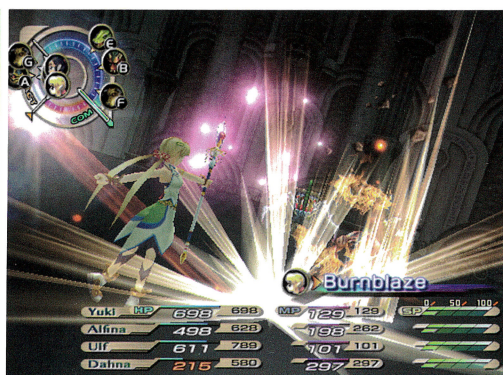


Grandia II abandoned the youthful spirit of the first, and while its darker tale was clever in parts, it failed to make much of an emotional impact. Apparently I'm not the only one who felt that way, since the initial announcement of Grandia III explicitly promised a return to the spirit of the first Grandia, and in the press release announcing the U.S. version, Director Hidenobu Takahashi repeatedly promises an "uplifting story" that will leave you with "an overwhelmingly positive feeling." It's enough to make you worry that they've turned the script over to Tony Robbins.

Fortunately, GameArts has found the right tone with Grandia III, and delivered a story that's rich on substance as well as charm. The hero is Yuki, a teen obsessed with airplanes and the adventures of a legendary pilot. Yuki has devoted his youth to building planes of his own, and has finally crafted one stable enough to escape his backwater hometown. But when his mom stows away on the maiden flight, she literally sends the pair crashing into the midst of a much larger drama that involves such "uplifting" concepts as mass deicide and the extermination of humanity. The basic story is well done, but far from revolutionary. It's the little details that make Grandia such a delight—the cute running gags, the dinnertime chats, and the legitimately touching bonds that form







between the characters. When every other RPG in the universe features a tormented orphan as a main character, it's hard not to like a hero who recruits his mom as the first party member.

Grandia III's other great strength is its battle system, which was brilliant in the original and has only grown better in each subsequent sequel. The basics are simple enough to be approachable, but as you learn the behavior of your enemies, and

the nuances of timing and distance, you'll be able to counter your foes' deadliest attacks, eradicate foes with well-timed chains, and defeat stronger foes than your level should allow. Boss fights can run upwards of thirty minutes without ever becoming tedious, since there are so many factors to consider. Best of all, there are no random encounters; you can see your enemies on the field, and dodge or stun them with a well-timed swing of your sword

if you're not in a fighting mood.

The environments in Grandia III are eye-poppingly gorgeous, although the developers cheat a bit by barring you from looking up or down. The battle visuals are equally striking, with impressive enemy design and flashy spell effects. The inimitable Noriyuki Iwadare has returned to compose the score, and while it straddles the fine line between enchanting and annoying, most of it falls on the right side. Even the game's oddly delightful J-Pop theme song has survived intact, another success in Square-Enix's ambitious plan to employ every Japanese singer who speaks halfway decent English. The English voice actors are competent and well cast, and many are uncannily similar to their Japanese counterparts.

Despite Grandia's many triumphs, I have no doubt that a certain percentage of RPG fans will hate it for its completely linear nature. They'll certainly have a point; Grandia III offers almost no way for players to make the quest their own. There are no branches in the storyline, no opportunities



That can't be a good sign...

"It's the little details that make Grandia such a delight..."

to do tasks in different order, and no ways to enter new areas until the storyline demands it. The game even seems to rub it in players' faces, offering a beautiful world map that's studded with interesting places you can never, ever visit. A few optional areas and side quests would have gone a long way; it's hard to feel that you're driving the events of the story when the thing you need to do next is the only thing you can do.

Ever since the success of Final Fantasy X proved that players are willing to part with their freedom for a good story, more and more RPGs have sacrificed the thrill of exploration for the storytelling possibilities of an "interactive movie." I'm no fan of this



trend, but Grandia III succeeds for many of the same reasons Final Fantasy X did: the story is compelling, the game is gorgeous, and the battle system is smart enough to keep your brain engaged. Grandia III may not be everything it could have been, but it's a great game nonetheless. **play**

## Grandia III

score 9.0

- + Pretty graphics, charming story, and incredible battle system.
- The most linear RPG ever.



System(s)	PS2, XB, XB360, PS3, PSP	Publisher	Electronic Arts	Available	Now
Developer	EA Sports	Online	1-2 players	ESRB Rating	T



words Greg Orlando

On board Electronic Arts' pain bus, the hits keep coming. *Fight Night Round 3* takes the sweet science of boxing to bloody new levels, and the results are certainly impressive.

Electronic Arts has built one brutal boxing simulation here. A fighter's luck is written on his face; As he takes a beating, his eyes swell and redden, and bloody cuts carve a path down his cheeks or streak from the nose into the mouth. When a boxer receives a stunning blow, the game slows dramatically and its ambient noises warp accordingly to highlight the peril. Knockdowns are punctuated by repeated replays, with the boxing glove shown crashing into a face or gut, the stricken boxer's head whipping back and both blood and sweat sprays shooting out at the screen. Open-mouthed competitors glide down to the canvas, sometimes landing on their knees with their gloves touching the ground before collapsing. The experience is one of video games' most immediate, and possibly most disturbing. Fighters, were they real, would get severely hurt here.

A nice bit of variation among the fighters dramatically bolsters play. The game holds a decent amount of punch- and defensive styles, body alignments, and stances, meaning individual fighters look, punch, and block in a lot of different ways. Discovering an opponent's inclinations (and thus his weak spots) simply by the way he holds his hands or the angle at which his body is placed is one of the game's challenges—and its simple

pleasures, to be sure. Despite the game's unabashed love for the sweeping haymaker and punishing crosses which seem remarkably easy to land, *Round 3* does make an effort to emphasize boxing's strategic side. Putting punches together in combinations, and taking advantage of weaknesses pays dividends. Soft, stinging jabs might not result in spectacular knockouts, but they will win rounds if employed effectively. They'll also lead to cuts and swelling, which increase the amount of damage a punch causes and decreases a fighter's ability to block, respectively.

Punches can be deflected causing a fighter to become momentarily off-balance, allowing the opposition to land a punishing counterblow. The counterblows are wonderful to pull off; it's thrilling, say, to duck under a sweeping cross and then pop up to respond with a left-right-left combination. Sadly, EA has imbued some of its A.I. fighters with an almost uncanny ability to block a punch, leaving the player stunned and wide open for a looping punch. Some of the game's more...defensive minded combatants can pull

this maneuver off four or five times in a row, a sort of miraculous occurrence that not even a robotic Muhammad Ali should be able to perform.

An excellent career mode offers the opportunity to build a fighter from scratch or guide a legend from his humble beginnings. Bumps such as gratuitously placed advertisements for Burger King, Under Armour, and Dodge, and a decided dearth of training minigames only serve as nuisances here, small things to be

disregarded in the face of a series of thrilling bouts against has-beens, never-wases, and the real deals. **play**

Fight Night Round 3

score9.0

+	A TKO in nearly every respect
-	A few extraneous details and AI hitches

"Soft, stinging jabs might not result in spectacular knockouts, but they will win rounds if employed effectively..."





System(s)	PlayStation 2	Publisher	2K Games	Available	February 28
Developer	Cambridge Studios	Online/Multi	NA	ESRB Rating	M

# The Game

A solid gaming extension of the frenetic show

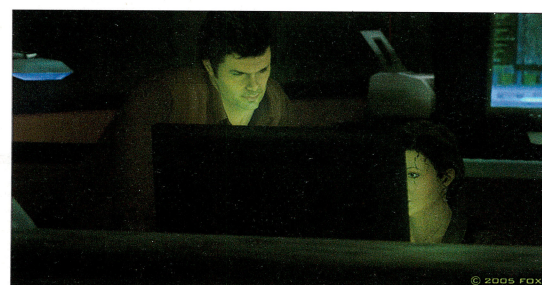
words **Brady Fiechter**

**L**ike the show it's capably siphoned from, *24: The Game* rides on a breathless urgency, folding its events around a condensed 24-hour hunt for terrorists. The scene is a well-represented present-day Los Angeles, where you assume the role of several members of the CTU, a counter-terrorist organization who, on this particular hunt, are out to find bombs, save the vice president, thwart a kidnapping, and ultimately protect the world from a greater threat. What the story lacks in emotional punch, the slick, true-to-the-show presentation makes up for with entertaining support. Fans of the series will be especially hooked.

*24: The Game* is bound to satisfy the more casual gamer arriving from their involvement with the show, but the more discriminating type will find some of the unrefined stretches less than satisfactory,

like the awkward driving missions and enemy shootouts left more to mechanical technique than reactive skill. The targeting system, which has you flicking automatic lock-ons from one enemy to the next with the right analog, rewards more advanced play through specific impact points, but in spite of the fun of getting into a rhythm and clearing out a room full of terrorists, the action is rather subdued and light on strong AI.

If the game were all straight shootouts, it'd wear out its welcome, but it's the whole of its varied mechanics that keep you involved. Breaching security codes and interrogating witnesses are good breaks in the action, and the stealth and sniping scenarios provide a nice change in gameplay. No one section of play would stand out on its own, but the clever integration of it all into the energetic



“Breaching security codes and interrogating witnesses are good breaks in the action...”



narrative structure maintains your interest. If you've played a Cambridge Studios game in the past (the superior *Ghost Hunter* and *Primal*), you'll notice signature design traits in *24: The Game*, and it's these more subtle components that finally make it a worthy ride. **play**

**LEFT**  
Chase scenes are one of the many aspects to *24*...

## 24: The Game

score **7.5**

+ Impressive character faces bypass the typical creepiness

- Multiple gameplay devices lack a central polish



# Full Auto

Don't just race the track, destroy it

System(s)	Xbox 360	Online/Multi	8-player Online
Developer	Pseudo Interactive	Available	February 14
Publisher	Sega	ESRB Rating	T

"Damn, this game's got a lot of explosions in it," exclaimed a wise friend of mine as she watched me bring down parking structures, detonate gas stations, demolish roadside tankers, shatter glass store fronts, and crumble mountain faces—all in the name of sweet victory. You see, victory is more than winning first place; sometimes it takes a big score to move on to the next event, accruing destruction points in just about any way you see fit.

Full Auto works as a competent racing game, but it's really more about leaving a scene of ridiculous damage in your wake—including the opponents themselves, which can go down in a number of ways, through direct weapons attack, aggressive driving or the shrapnel from the surrounding chaos. There's nothing that boldly stands out about the progression, presentation or general set up in Full Auto; it's just a kick to get in the car and plow to the finish line for the next event.

The "unwreck" feature is the game's biggest invention, which enables you to rewind any moment in the race you feel the need, as long as you've got the meter full. This doesn't feel cheap or unbalanced, because the races are so out of control, it simply prompts you to become more aggressive and take wild risks. **Brady Flechter**

score 7.5

+

Plenty of modes, unwreck a lot of fun.

-

Cars are awfully generic, track design inconsistent.



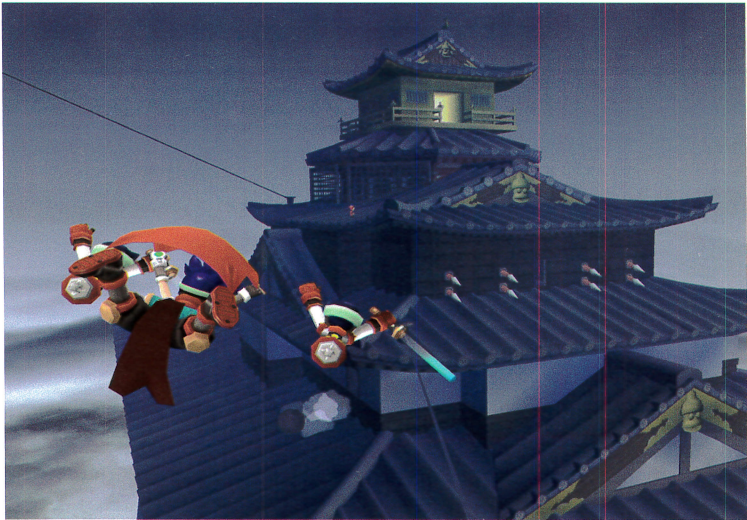
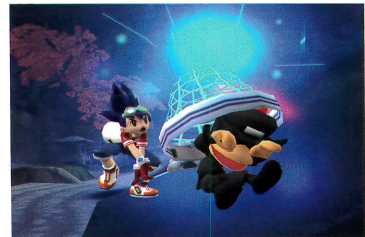
# Ape Escape 3

Ape skit

System(s)	PlayStation 2	Online/Multi	No
Developer	Sony	Available	Now
Publisher	Sony	ESRB Rating	E

Monkeys have taken over television broadcasting and are feeding the masses an endless torrent of stupefying garbage. Sony is trying to tell you something about TV executives, and Ape Escape 3 is not exactly subtle about it. But at least its monkeys can be scooped up with nets.

Relentlessly goofy, the 3D platformer Escape 3 has brains enough to parody classic actors and their works: a monkey prances in black-and-white as Charlie Chaplin, another sits on a huge bed and spins its head in homage to The Exorcist. The game also knows to keep things moving; simian targets are usually bunched together to prevent levels from becoming extended hide-and-seek sessions—and it's all done with enough saccharine sweetness to give Cindy Brady diabetes. An actively pokey camera requires constant readjustment to center the heroes on important stuff like switches, fleeing



monkeys, and goodies. Under normal conditions, the camera serves only as a minor nuisance. During chases (especially those with obstacles providing cover for the apes), however, it's a feces-flinging bastard, and no leniency may be extended when it hampers play. **Greg Orlando**

score 8.0

+

Cute and fun; lots of smart Hollywood references.

-

Costumes are superfluous; more of the same ape-chasing madness

"...it's all done with enough saccharine sweetness to give Cindy Brady diabetes."



## Dead or Alive 4

Kasumi's revenge

System(s)	Xbox 360	Online/Multi	2-16
Developer	Tecmo	Available	Now
Publisher	Tecmo	ESRB Rating	M

They don't make 3D fighters more beautiful and fluid than Dead or Alive 4. With online play, a nice roster of well-loved characters, and a fighting system that's always been more than competent (if not ever enough to impress the diehards), the game fairly well soars on angels' wings.

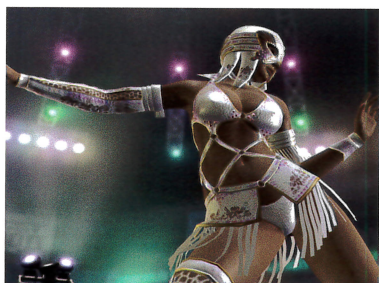
Yet there's trouble in paradise. Dead or Alive as a game series has always featured bosses whose attacks and abilities far outrange those of the player characters. For 4, a liquid-metal version of the female fighter Kasumi proves frustrating to an extreme. She can teleport away from attacks, counters strikes with a vengeance, and rolls off 10-plus hit combinations as a matter of course. This is Tecmo's stab at making the game hardcore, and it fails spectacularly.

There's some small problems with online play, certainly enough to note. Slowdown, which happens now and again, is not overly problematic save for the fact it

allows for countermoves to be more easily performed. One of Alive 4's improvements came in the form of a tightened window for these attacks, and the slowdown fairly well throws that window back open.

**Greg Orlando**

score	8.0	+	Fast, gorgeous.
		-	End boss is cheaper than free soda.



## MS Saga: A New Dawn

Your Mobile Suit awaits



System(s)	PlayStation 2	Online/Multi	No
Developer	BEC	Available	February 21
Publisher	Bandai	ESRB Rating	E

MS Saga: A New Dawn, while graphically sound isn't on par with likes of Grandia 3, Dragon Quest VIII, or the forthcoming Final Fantasy XII. But what it lacks in visual complexity it more than makes up for in exactly what its fans will flock to it for—Gundam, and plenty of it. By way of 39 customizable mobile suits on which you can rig some 60 parts (and actually mix series types) this first traditional Mobile Suit Gundam RPG is definitely a love letter to fans—all 60 some-odd hours of it. If it's tinkering with mobile suits you want then pull up a grease gun. Now is the time to test your mecha metal using a commerce and battle-system tailor-made for Gundam gear-heads. Elsewhere the drama doesn't always run deep, and the plot twists run the gamut of

wartime clichés, but Saga is definitely more than your traditional heap of MSG kindling for the fire. From its super deformed mobile suits to its youthful cast and over-the-top villains, one thing you can't accuse Saga of is ripping-off any of its predecessors, and that's a family tree you could build a city under. Instead, the story begins in a time where Mobile Suits are relics of the past and forges its heroes from the ashes of a decimated orphanage. Pull up a cockpit and stay awhile. **Dave Halverson**



...Did I remember to install that BFG?



score	7.5	+	Original premise, comprehensive Gundam creation and battles, and character designs from Akira Yasuda of Street Fighter fame
		-	It's long, involves a fair to heavy amount of tinkering, and could do with a better over world.



# TOCA Race Driver 3

TOCA rolls on...beautifully

System(s)	PlayStation 2, Xbox, PC	Online/Multi	No
Developer	Codemasters	Available	February 21
Publisher	Codemasters USA Inc.	ESRB Rating	E

Ah, poor TOCA. Every year Codemasters puts out a new version, and it's as sure a bet as anything in this industry that it will be even better than last year's – and that once again it will be mostly ignored by U.S. gamers. Which is a damn shame, because this is a racing perfectionist's wet dream: 80 different circuits on 43 different tracks across 13 countries, 35 different styles of racing, over 70 cars, and online play. And nothing drives exactly the same – when you hop in go kart, it feels like driving a go kart, not a slow Formula 1 racer. In fact, the driving engine is so realistic it takes a good few hours of practice just to keep on the track, and if you spin out or crack against something, the damage modeling will cripple you car. Which actually brings up one of the game's few flaws – on the track it's as real as it gets, but off the track you might as well be playing Pole Position. Tire barriers,

“...the driving engine is so realistic it takes a good few hours of practice just to keep on the track.”

even bushes are solid as neutron stars, and hitting one brings you to a dead halt. Also, more of the game really needs to be accessible from day one – the vast majority of tracks and styles are initially locked, which is pretty annoying. Still, this is just about as good as it gets. Maybe someday Codemasters will cram a NASCAR license in there and it will get the attention it deserves. **Jeff Lundigran**

score 9.0

+

 Racing Perfection

—

 Watch out for that...bush



# Teen Titans

Smells a lot like Teen spirit

System(s)	PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube	Online/Multi	No
Developer	A2M	Available	April 4
Publisher	Majesco Ent.	ESRB Rating	E

When a series like this goes the way of the Dodo (farewell my cheeky little American anime. See you on the other side, Starfire) all that's left for future generations is a short stack of commercial-free DVDs and, if it's lucky, a video game, in which case the latter was left in the care of Majesco Ent., the latest and one of the greatest well-meaning but flawed purveyors of original and licensed properties to fall onto hard times. The result is a game that while not bad screams by-the-numbers brawler. Of course, all 5 Titans are present for us to toggle between for any given situation, which consists of a series of assorted brawls—camera lying well back to mask the up-close nature

of the models—and boss battles, as the Titans blurt out their sassy dialogue and lay the smack down in pursuit of each series-endemic goon. While the game does have a good overall look, layout and a nicely fleshed out combo and special move system that evolves with the game, overall it's a wobbly effort given what a fantastic series TT was. Enemy bots explode in a single chunk of shrapnel, the collision is sloppy, the action is mostly repetitive and there's no sign of the WB animation. It's anyone's guess (paging Puffy AmiYumi) what happened with the opening theme. **Dave Halverson**

score 6.5

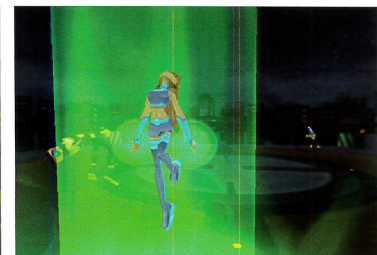
+

 Good representation of the series via cool, super-deformed art and the authentic voice work.

—

 As beat-'em-ups go, TT falls short due to the repetitive nature of the gameplay and a lack of polish.

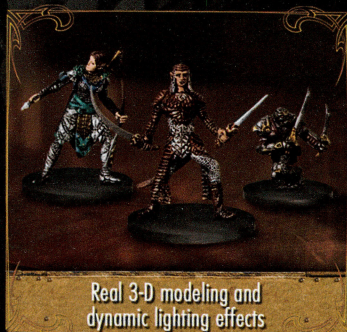
“...farewell my cheeky little American anime. See you on the other side, Starfire.”



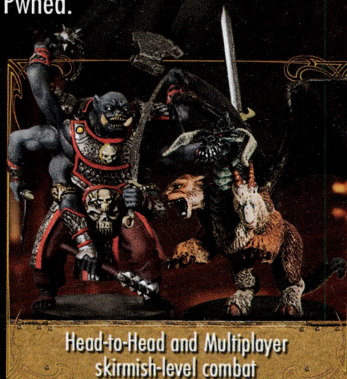


# WAGE WAR ACROSS STRANGE, NEW LANDS— SUCH AS YOUR KITCHEN TABLE.

Seek out deadly monsters, bold heroes, and vengeful gods to form into a mighty army.  
Pit your forces against the pathetic legions assembled by your friends, crush them,  
and bask in the glory of their defeat. Pwned.



Real 3-D modeling and  
dynamic lighting effects



Head-to-Head and Multiplayer  
skirmish-level combat



Fantasy Violence

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## Def Jam Fight For New York: The Takeover

preview

System(s)	PSP	Publisher	Electronic Arts
Developer	Electronic Arts	Available	Spring 2006



New York needs an enema, and crime boss D-Mob means to give it one. Electronic Arts' sort-of wrestling game comes to the PSP this spring, and promises to tell the story of how Mr. Mob got his groove on and then used it to take over the so nice, they named it twice.

Takeover serves as a prequel to the PlayStation 2's Def Jam Vendetta and Def Jam: Fight for New York. As one of Mr. Mob's minions, players must lump up suckas in a series of

street brawls, with wins earning both money and respect. As befitting a hip hop-themed fighter, the game will prominently feature gear by makers such as Reebok and Ecco

**"...promises to tell the story of how Mr. Mob got his groove on..."**



Unlimited as well as various musical artists including Busta Rhymes, Ludacris, Method Man, Redman, and Snoop Dogg. Powered by Aki's great wrestling engine, Takeover allows for varying fight styles such as kickboxing, martial arts, and street fighting. In combat, players can pull weapons from the crowd, or slam their foes into walls, dividers, and floors. This year's model shines with a new online multiplayer mode and a new series of mount attacks. Word to someone's mom.

Greg Orlando



## Generation of Chaos

preview

System(s)	PSP	Publisher	NIS America
Developer	Idea factory	Available	February 28

Generation of Chaos's strategic elements alone could fill a small tome. Save it to say that the act of deploying and managing troops and key characters is as fleshed out and menu-savvy as any strategy RPG in the known universe, while at the same time skillfully streamlined and executed by Idea Factory, the current masters of the craft. Screen after screen is attached to gorgeous character designs and reams of military jargon all wrapped in a story that's concise and to the point yet absolutely rife with character development and drama. Shifting to the field of battle we find a strategy RPG gamer's dream come true in a portable package, the only fly in the ointment (and this may be rectified by the

time it ships) being bouts of slow-down as the designers have decided to literally fill GoC's fields with massive amounts of detailed sprites accentuated by skillfully super-deformed commanders and their über-attacks, resulting in hulking death dealers, parades of light and anime-bathed effects. If you're new to the strategy RPG fold, the overworld strategy may take some getting used to (although the game does a fair job of grandfathering you through) but once initiated, like pretty much everything else Idea Factory produces, you'll undoubtedly be investing in alternative sources of PSP energy.

Dave Halverson

**"...as fleshed out and menu-savvy as any strategy RPG in the known universe..."**





## “Metal Gear Ac!d 2 is exactly the kind of satisfying sequel you’d expect for this esoteric arm of Metal Gear.”

### Metal Gear Ac!d 2

preview

System	PSP	Online/Multi	2-player
Developer	Kojima Productions	Available	March
Publisher	Konami	ESRB Rating	M



Note to haters/lovers of Metal Gear Ac!d and its turn-based card battles: Metal Gear Ac!d 2 brings the love/hate all over again, relying on the same core mechanics that have little to do with the action and adventure you’ve grown accustomed to with the Metal Gear franchise. Once again, you manipulate a deck of cards marked by the Metal Gear aesthetic, utilizing their particular attributes to wage war on a simple battlefield grid.

The usual sequel blocks are in place: more cards, more

features, more efficient interface. The visual style remains removed from the Metal Gear series, stepping outside Metal Gear Ac!d’s manga inspirations into a richer, more distinguished style of color and texture. It’s a pleasing package. If the methodical battles need a little spicing up to get you interested, Konami’s packing in a pair of 3D goggles to play up the unique angle on the series even more. In the 3D mode, the images are independently displaced, requiring the binocular-like contraption that snaps over the PSP to provide a layer of

depth to the image. The effect is nifty enough, but whether it’s gimmick or enhancement device comes down to little more than personal preference. For all the parts that do matter, Metal Gear Ac!d 2 is exactly the kind of satisfying sequel you’d expect for this esoteric arm of Metal Gear. **Brady Fichter**



### Pursuit Force

preview

System(s)	PSP	Publisher	BigBig Studios
Developer	SCEA	Available	March 28

Pursuit Force has you jumping from vehicle to vehicle like Jackie Chan on a liter of Red Bull whacking evil-doers and commanding control all within the context of timed, Outrun-style road assault that looks more like something you might find on Xbox than your PSP. As the member of an elite police division, by boat, car, motorcycle, or on foot, you’re all that stands

between Capital City and an unstoppable crime spree; so it’s shoot first, ask questions later and drive like the wind. The action is accentuated (or obstructed depending on your poison) by the chief either kissing or chewing your ass out depending on performance and the margin for error as the plot thickens diminishes accordingly, forcing us to go where only the craziest stuntmen dare.



“...jumping from vehicle to vehicle like Jackie Chan on a liter of Red Bull...”

In other words Pursuit Force kicks a whole lot of ass. Yet another promising '06 PSP game that reeks of a polished 1st-party effort, Sony is obviously not content to let the DS hog the spotlight. Fine details (such as separate layers of clothing that flap in the wind) abound and the play mechanics wrenched into each pursuit make it the best alternative to the rash of racing action clones yet, rather than just another Chase HQ or Spy Hunter rip-off.

**Dave Halverson**





## Street Fighter Alpha 3 Max

score 9.0

System	PSP	Online/Multi	Wi-Fi Multiplayer
Developer	Capcom	Available	February 7
Publisher	Capcom	ESRB Rating	T

Street Fighter Alpha 3 Max is Street Fighter Hero. Not only do we get a direct port of the arcade game, but also exclusive PSP modes galore (including a new to the Alpha series Variable Battle Mode), Wi-Fi functionality and of course, the option to don wallpaper or enjoy widescreen Street Fighter, the latter of which adds a new dimension to the action. Playing against widescreen versions

of Capcom's stunning BGs bursting with that trademark Alpha bustle is a thick layer of icing on an already mouth-watering cake. Counting Yun, Maki, and Eagle from Vs. SNK 2, and Ingrid from Evolution, 37 fighters (plus an additional 4 to unlock) make the scene and the animation is simply on a level all its own. No worries regarding the PSP D-pad either. It's surprisingly apt for the challenge, especially given



the system's first-rate shoulder buttons. I can't muster up a single grain of sand to kick into A3M's lovely hand-drawn face, other than if you're just burnt out on SF altogether, in which case I would now urge you to pick up the habit once again. Now you can take your addiction with you. A few years ago this would have affected the global economy. Now it's just UMD for the train ride home. **Dave Halverson**



"I can't muster up a single grain of sand to kick into A3M's lovely hand-drawn face..."

## Ys: The Arc of Napishtim

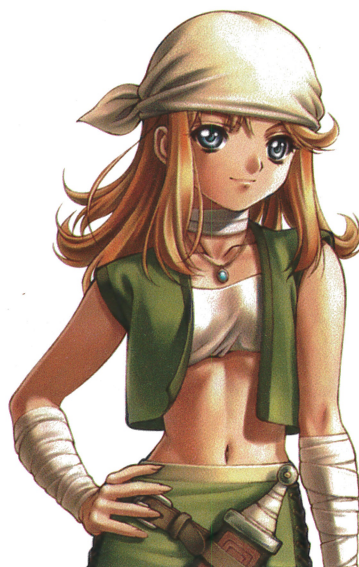
score 7.5

System	PSP	Online/Multi	No
Developer	Falcom	Available	March 7
Publisher	Konami	ESRB Rating	E

Through all of Ys' successes and failures I've stood by, always at the ready to see what the tiny sprite that I rammed into thousands of enemies on Turbo CD, Adol, would do next. I blame Yuzo Koshiro for orchestrating a soundtrack that's been tattooed on my inner on-demand list ever since. The great thing about the PSP version of The Arc of Napishtim was that it was to mirror the Japanese PC game which, on its way to PS2 (where it remains a very good game), picked up a bad case of American localization, conceding its hand-drawn sprites for renders, and anime cut scenes for bulky CG. The good news is that the anime is back (precluding the entire first act of the PS2 game and with it Terra's initial role), but the hand-drawn characters sadly wouldn't fit into memory and so we're back to renders, albeit more in tune with the original anime look. If only I could end this review here, we could all go home happy, but the sad fact is that even though the glorious music marches on, the 10+ seconds of loading between every small area mortally wounds an otherwise great game. Given certain fields take little more than that to

cross, the frustration is high. Although the game is so lovingly detailed I urge you to tough it out, how much the loading affects you personally is for you to decide.

**Dave Halverson**

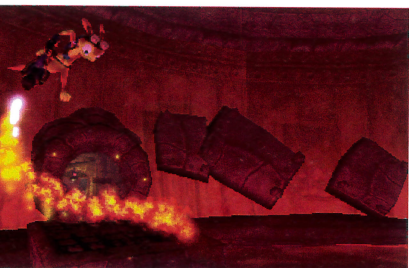




## Daxter

preview

System(s)	PSP	Publisher	SCEA
Developer	Ready at Dawn	Available	March



**D**axter is the best PSP game I've seen to date. In fact, I'd go as far as saying that what DKC was to the SNES Daxter is to the PSP. If I didn't know better I'd think Daxter was a product of Naughty Dog which roughly translated means that there's a new super-developer in town. Sure, Ready at Dawn are emulating ND but not only does Daxter look better than anything on PSP, but it plays so well that I find myself adoring what I've always considered the most annoying fuzz ball this side of Awesome Possum. Taking place

between Jak I & II (while Jak was up to his ears in Dark Eco) we find Daxter making ends meet working for the Ozmar family's extermination business, the first line of defense against a metalbug invasion and of course the perfect ruse for a full-fledged Jak-style platformer. Daxter (who is covered in realistic fur during the in-engine cut scenes) graduates from his electric spatula to a toxic leaf blower in short order just as Taryn (imagine Ashlin only maybe even sexier) shows up, followed by the game's first hovercraft (little Betsy) level which defies the limitations of the hardware even further. I've only nicked the surface and I'm scraping my jaw off the floor. The proverbial bar has officially been raised. **Dave Halverson**



"I've only nicked the surface and I'm scraping my jaw off the floor."

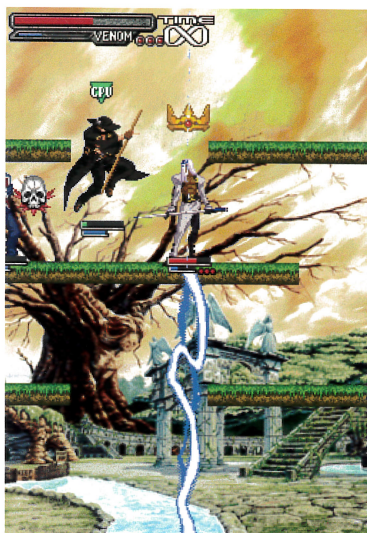
## Guilty Gear Dust Strikers

preview

System(s)	DS	Publisher	Majesco
Developer	ARC System Works	Available	April

**G**uilty Gear Dust Strikers is a fresh take on the franchise for sure. It's beautiful for one (although the characters do appear a tad small on DS)—features wireless multiplayer, 10 cool, DS-ified mini-games (essential to building a cool Robo Ky character) and Challenge, Survival, VS Battle,

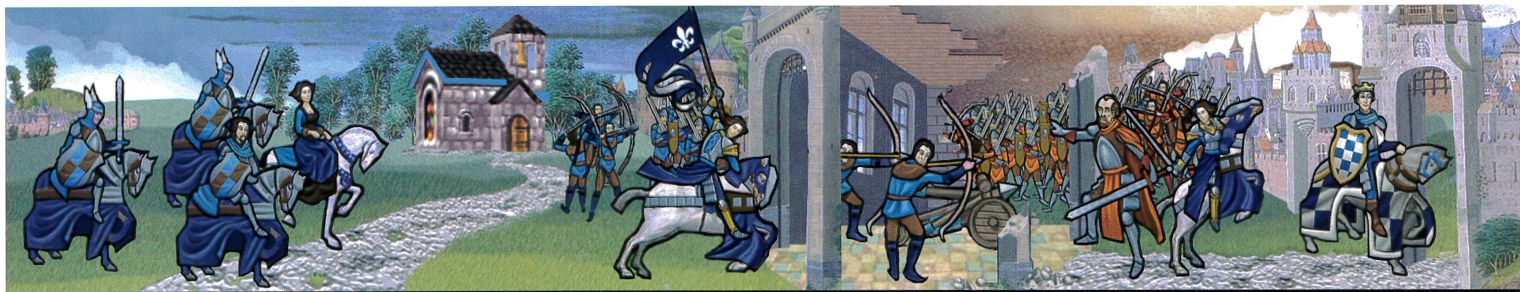
Story, and Arcade modes. Story mode—although carried out well using the lower screen for text, unfortunately recycles each character's pre-battle art on the upper, where full body poses would have been nice, but the preludes and battles are GG-fueled all the way, burning with attitude, and the



final boss doesn't disappoint: Huge and emblematic of both Heaven and Hell. GG DS also spits out the same gritty metal and narration of its arcade counterparts and features all 21 characters, fluidly animated. My only minor quibbles thus far are a lack of any additional moves, advantages of the vertical platforms (although the traditional set does nicely, so that's really splitting hairs) and that there's no parallax scrolling to be found: Flat BGs all the way. I'm still lovin' it though. Four-player battles are crazy and the new traps and power-ups add an interesting dimension. **Dave Halverson**

"GG DS also spits out the same gritty metal and narration of its arcade counterparts and features all 21 characters..."





## Age of Empires: The Age of Kings

score 7.0

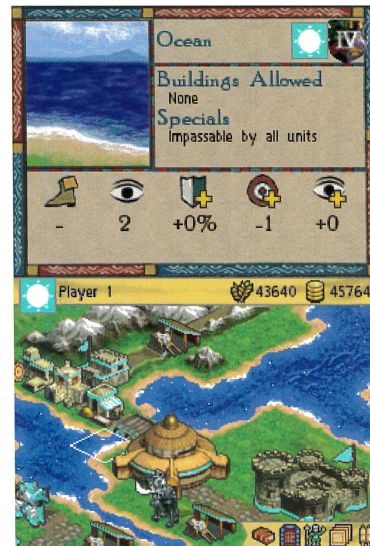
System	DS	Online/Multi	1-4 players
Developer	Digital Eclipse	Available	October
Publisher	Majesco	ESRB Rating	E

Immediacy gets lost in translation as the PC's empire building real-time strategy Age of Empires moves to the Nintendo DS, where it takes up residence as a turn-based game. Although Age of Empires: Age of Kings remains as fun and challenging as its PC counterparts, the genre shift doesn't come off without some rough patches. Kings now emphasizes hardcore, Advance Wars-style strategy, but loses its frantic pace and sense of having actually built something, let alone a society; inventions and civilization improvements occur daily, and buildings take 24 hours (one turn) to erect.

Three-dimensional buildings look good on screen, but they're not well-suited to the action. The game adopts a three-quarters top-down perspective, and this makes buildings grouped together hard to distinguish and the units stacked on them even harder to discern. Still, Kings redeems itself by including historical heroes such as Joan of Arc, a wealth of



exotic units to produce and wield against the foes (even if it's odd Joan would employ cavalry on camels), and a series of unlockable missions featuring famous battle grounds such as Hastings and Agincourt. **Greg Orlando**



The special effects hit strong and often.

## Tales of Phantasia

score 8.0

System	GBA	Online/Multi	No
Developer	Namco	Available	March 6
Publisher	Nintendo	ESRB Rating	E

Tales of Phantasia opens in a tiny, primitive village, where the few inhabitants like to talk about monsters, religion and how the world is all the sudden becoming a dangerous place. A pair of young boys take center stage, heading outside the village walls to explore a world map on their way to some spirited hunting. Ten minutes into Tales of Phantasia, you know pretty much what you're getting into: a pleasantly involving, perfectly traditional role-playing game

that sticks to all the old-school conventions that recall the glory days of hand-drawn adventures. Here, the enjoyable real-time battles continue, along with the slightly annoying restrictions and voices that come along with the presentation.

**Brady Fiechter**

Lovely 2D graphics abound.



## WRC FIA World Rally Championship

score 8.0

System	PSP	Online/Multi	Wi-Fi head-to-head
Developer	Traveller's Tales	Available	February
Publisher	Bandai Namco Games	ESRB Rating	E

While there's certainly no shortage of PSP racing games on the shelves, there's a veritable drought when it comes to Rally games: a drought that Bandai Namco Games intends to eradicate with the impressive WRC. TT spared no expense assembling their latest racer, packing the UMD with Time Trial, Single Rally, 8-player Wi-Fi and Championship modes, comprehensive profile creation including a full roster of 30 official cars and 36 drivers, and the look and feel of a console game down to the lighting, weather, and environmental effects over 64 stages and 16 Official Rallies. Behind either of the 3 camera positions WRC looks absolutely brilliant, and while slowing to a crawl reveals the clever ruse (trees and such resemble facades up close). Who's got the time when Franz Ferdinand's "Take Me Out" is drowning out your co-pilot.

**Dave Halverson**





Preview

# Space Rangers 2 Rise of the Dominators

In which Pooh takes his act into outer space to blast robots

words Greg Orlando

Somewhere under the radar, Space Rangers 2: Rise of the Dominators is probably the littlest PC game that could. It's a sweeping adventure spanning a world with 250 planets, five alien races, three separate flavors of killer robots, 150 different action-based quests, and more than 20 text-based missions.

Part real-time strategy, part turn-based adventure, Dominators has been likened to Sid Meier's Pirates and Alpha Centauri. After customizing a hero and choosing his profession, players are sent out into outer space to explore, conquer, trade, and fight. From there, the game opens up immensely; players can build

bases on alien worlds and build robots to attack and destroy enemy encampments, perform pirate raids on alien ships, assault the would-be universe-conquering Dominators, discover new technologies, run through black holes, and even play Asteroids-style mini-games.

A brief playtest revealed much to like about Dominators, and even its text-based adventures are fairly savory. One such challenge had the player running for president of a planet, forming a platform on which to run, and attempting to win a majority of the vote. It's a dirty job, to be sure, but it's all in a day's work for a ranger.

"Part real-time strategy, part turn-based adventure, Dominators has been likened to Sid Meier's Pirates and Alpha Centauri."

Review

# Star Wars: Empire at War

The galaxy is yours to save or raze

Recommended system specs	
OS: Windows 2k/XP	Video: GeForce 6/Radeon X800
Processor: P4 2.4 GHz/Athlon 2200+	Sound: Audigy 2+
Memory: 512 MB RAM	Internet: Broadband

words Mike Griffin

Empire at War has all the major Star Wars franchise heroes, villains and planets, and a story that picks up just prior to the events of Episode IV: A New Hope. This RTS also contains an encyclopedic array of Rebel and Empire military units—both space- and land-based—across a celestial canvas of the Galactic Civil War. The Skirmish mode takes care of quick single and multiplayer (up to 8p) games, and the lengthy galactic campaign pulls you into hours of tactical map progression, one planet at a time. The campaign enjoys fairly brisk progression and you feel

powerful early on, developing technology trees and stocking your land parties and space fleets with tons of well-textured, adequately animated and great sounding Star Wars units.

Navigating through combat and fortifying the planets' overall defenses will be familiar territory for veteran RTS players as the control, camera and interface do not stray far from tradition. While newbies will absolutely want to investigate the tutorial, Empire at War is actually less convoluted—in terms of interface actions—than most genre titles

"...the game shuns resource harvesting in favor of more focused military and territorial expansion."

System(s)	PC	Publisher	Cinemaware Marquee
Developer	IC/Elemental Games	Available	March



Warring robots seek out the enemy's bases.

System(s)	PC	Publisher	LucasArts
Developer	Petroglyph	Online/Multi	2-player campaign/8-player skirmish
Available	March	ESRB Rating	Teen



Orbiting fleets protect the incredibly durable space stations.

of its ilk, as the game shuns resource harvesting in favor of more focused military and territorial expansion.

Empire at War has a hungry engine. Unless you drop the graphics to rather unappealing settings, the frame-rate will chug during heavy action on a mid-range PC. Regardless, watching loads of X-Wing and Tie Fighter vessels buzzing around asteroid belts and seeing huge armored assault frigates bearing down on Star Destroyers, surrounded by explosions that would likely get a nod from Mr. Lucas... this is the Star Wars toy set you always wanted to play with, and it has sufficient depth to satiate the RTS cognoscenti.

Star Wars: Empire at War

score **7.5**

- + The solid tactical mechanics we expect from ex-Westwood Studios staff. Taps background and characters from films and novels. Sandbox mod tools for everyone.
- Though perfectly serviceable, unit pathfinding and AI is at times erratic. Cinematic camera mode selects dubious angles. Campaign has a little too much filler.



System(s)	PC (Xbox 360 TBA)	Publisher	Valve (via Steam)
Developer	Ritual Entertainment	Available	March



# SiN EMERGENCE

The emergence of modern episodic gaming

words Mike Griffin

After years of contract projects, sequels and expansions, Ritual Entertainment will celebrate its 10th anniversary in 2006 with the introduction of SiN Episodes, an episodic first person shooter series that revisits the futuristic SiN universe five years after the events of the original game. Committing to an unproven model as an independent developer is a risky venture, so why is Ritual taking the episodic plunge? Fundamentally, they believe the industry is ready for it. With a five to six month release schedule, episodic production doesn't run into the absurd multi-year budgets of so many major titles. Players get to follow their favorite characters more often and developers can incorporate requests and try different types of gameplay on a per episode basis. And as SiN Episodes proves with its slick Source-powered visuals and top-notch sounds, episodic gaming can be every bit as aesthetically compelling as big budget titles locked into epic-length development.

This leads us to the value proposition of episodic gaming. Each installment in the SiN Episodes series is set to provide 4 to 6 hours of gameplay and story development. The length of a game should only be a handicap when it doesn't deliver the goods, and we'll gladly take five high quality hours over a dozen inconsistent hours. Ritual is also designing SiN Episodes in such a way that new players can jump into the series at any point for a solid, self-contained FPS campaign. The first episode is entitled Emergence, and it launches a proposed nine-part series covering a sprawling story arc across the mega-metropolis of Freepoint City. Each episode will cost less than \$20, delivered straight to your PC (and eventually Xbox 360) through a secure digital download. Will SiN Episodes be the breakthrough title to propel modern episodic gaming into the mainstream? A group of hardworking people with some excellent ideas are striving to make it so...minus the pressure of big publisher bullshit.





INTERVIEW

STEVE NIX, CEO, Ritual Entertainment

## Risk vs. Reward

**play:** Do the words *strong independent developer* describe the current and future Ritual Entertainment?

**Steve:** Independent developers want to be able to make games that they really care about and we're fortunately in that position. We'd like to keep making games that we're interested in and that means adapting to the market. The current mega-hit model—largely driven by limited shelf-space and massive marketing budgets—has been turning into a tougher playground for independents. That's why Ritual is leading the charge with digital episodic delivery as an alternative model using the Steam platform. Music, Movies, TV, Books and just about every form of content is moving into more customized chunks and it makes sense that gamers want the same thing. If things work out with episodic digital delivery, it will make Ritual stronger and will provide a huge boost for independent developers who follow. Ritual will turn ten this year and it feels like we're only just beginning to spread our wings. We have so many new ideas for the SiN universe and other games that we are going to make. **We know initial discussions with Microsoft have begun regarding a 360 version of SiN Episodes. How is that progressing?**

"The current mega-hit model—largely driven by limited shelf-space and massive marketing budgets—has been turning into a tougher playground for independents."

STEVE NIX, CEO, Ritual Entertainment

We're definitely interested in seeing SiN Episodes on other platforms and Xbox 360 is an awesome platform. Currently, we are very focused on getting the first episode out the door and then we'll increase our focus on the console strategy. We still have to get some formalities [such as Live delivery] finalized with Microsoft before we even announce it as a real title.

### What was the biggest breakthrough during development?

The first time we brought outside play testers in to try early versions of the game, we were sitting on pins and needles. We had taken on a huge risk going down this path on our own with SiN Episodes and we really hoped for a positive response. We usually do play testing, but we had never seen a response like those initial tests. The number one question was "When can I buy it?" That was many months ago and we've continued to build and test the game. **play**

remain open to player response. Players may grab onto a certain tangent we didn't expect, and if that's the case it's important we adjust our storyline to account for this.

As for lessons learned, one of the biggest is the need for brevity in the dialog. The fact is, this is a high action game, and no matter how fantastic my dialog is, no matter how great the voice acting is, it just simply can't compete with the fun of pumping bullets into baddies. Consequently, it became clear early on that the dialog needed to be very tight. As a writer, this is an interesting challenge. I'm tasked with showing characterization in as few words as possible.

**You mentioned the possibility of players grabbing onto certain plot points you didn't expect. How do you leave this opportunity open while keeping the overall story in focus?**

The idea of layering becomes a key



In SiN tradition, Episodes will have many interactive devices such as elevator panels, control terminals, phone booths and ATMs. The patrol car's interior dash will invite player interaction, and the game's Context Look system ensures that NPCs like Jessica may see and react to exactly what you're looking at.



element. This concept can be seen in television shows like *24* or *Lost*. Layering, for us anyway, means setting down foundational pieces that will pay off in later episodes. So a new character, a particular piece of dialog, *anything* really, is a potential twist waiting to happen. We're striving to keep each episode a playable experience in and of itself, so none of these elements will detract from a particular episode's story, but they will reward players that are coming along for the entire ride.

**If you think of TV and film, strong character development plays a huge role in maintaining viewer interest from the start...**

That's another thing that really excites me about the episodic story telling: the ability to dive into characters on a level seldom seen in a game. To pull that off though, I need rich characters. To this end I've given every character in SiN Episodes his



### Multiplayer Modding

Ritual remains fairly tight-lipped about multiplayer and modding plans for SiN Episodes, but we've gleaned a few bits of info:

- The current plan is to roll out multiplayer between Emergence and episode 2.
- Several team-based modes are planned, including a vanilla deathmatch.
- Team sizes will be comparable to Counter-Strike: Source.
- The single-player statistics system will be integrated, along with personalized performance ratings. A perfect match for Xbox Live.
- A full SDK will be made available, and modders will enjoy fresh textures and assets with each new episode release.

"The idea of layering becomes a key element. This concept can be seen in television shows like *24* or *Lost*. Layering, for us...means setting down foundational pieces that will pay off in later episodes."

SHAWN KETCHERSIDE, Lead Design, Ritual Entertainment



INTERVIEW

SHAWN KETCHERSIDE, Lead Design, Ritual Entertainment

## Dynamic Tales

**play:** So you're working on a 9-part story arc stocked with believable characters and an engaging, but flexible story. With the initial chapter almost ready for prime time, what are some of the big lessons you've learned about episodic game design and writing?

**Shawn:** Well, you pretty much hit it with the word "flexibility". As far as crafting and editing the overall story line, it's imperative that we generate plenty of ideas but keep loose on the details. Flexibility allows us to



or her own story and secrets. And just like real life, everybody has an agenda.

**When we first heard about the game's "dynamic" difficulty system, we didn't expect much beyond the usual AI buzzwords...but this is pretty insane. What does the game keep track of and how does it adjust?**

I seriously can't say enough good things about this system. I gotta' give credit to Ken Harward, our Lead Programmer. He sort of had this germ of an idea and just ran with it. Games are most fun when they fall in this difficulty sweet spot where it's challenging and gives players a sense of accomplishment, and the Dynamic Difficulty system is designed to keep players in that zone. Statistics are the lifeblood of the system. The game tracks hundreds of different player actions and

uses them to determine not only how well the player is doing, but measures pacing and play style as well. It's really amazing how well the system works.

**When did you realize it was going to be such a key feature?**

I knew we had something hot when we had a playtest session with a FPS neophyte and a hardcore CPL player. They both finished the game less than an hour apart. A more personal "wow" moment that really sticks out came right after a major tweak to the system: I was running through the game, trying to slip into a gamer's mindset. I happened to be doing really well, and as I came around a corner, suddenly one of the grunts just opened up with the secondary fire on his gun, taking me completely by surprise. It totally changed my strategy for that room. **play**



**play: Does the dynamic difficulty system have any effect on how you try to measure and control pacing in certain areas of a level?**

**Richard:** Most definitely. The level designers have a say regarding what level of difficulty the dynamic difficulty system should expect from each area of the game. We can set the system to expect a range of difficulties. For instance, if we set an area to be hard, it doesn't explicitly tell the dynamic difficulty system to be hard on the player. Instead, it tells the system that if the player is having a hard time in

an area, we expected it. And "hard" is a relative term, because hard for one player might be something completely different for another player. The dynamic difficulty system corrects for this. Meaning that one player's hard might be another player's easy. Even with this in mind though, the level designers can create unique areas of challenge for the player, as it is a very flexible system. We also have control over the pacing. We set expected arrival times throughout the game. So, for example, if the player is running ahead of schedule, the dynamic difficulty system can increase the difficulty and slow the player down.

*"In a short episodic game, you still need to deliver an interesting and captivating game... but in a much more condensed amount of time and level space."*

RICHARD HEATH, Lead Level Design, Ritual Entertainment

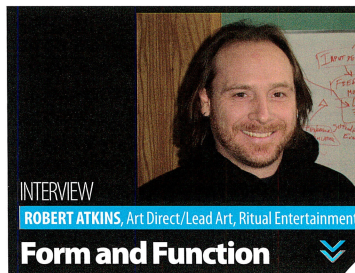
## Stat tracking on your G15

SiN Episodes will track hundreds of unique metrics as you play, from accuracy to headshots and bunny-hopping. The dynamic difficulty will tune the entire game in real-time to match your performance. If you're constantly using headshots, more enemies will wear protective head gear. Causing mass carnage with explosive barrels? Enemies will keep their distance from barrels. And if you own a Logitech G15 keyboard, your performance stats will update on the device's built-in LCD display.



**Cognizant of the episodic model, how does it feel to spread your vision across four to six hour bursts of gameplay, as opposed to planning levels for a full one-shot game?**

The process is similar to how we would normally approach a game, however, there are some exceptions. In a standard game, you have a lot more time to plan out the pacing, introduce new enemies and puzzle mechanics, and deliver the story elements. In a short episodic game, you still need to deliver an interesting and captivating game with a well balanced use of all of the aforementioned stuff, but in a much more condensed amount of time and level space. We have to go through and find the perfect moments to increase the intensity and to allow exploration, while keeping in mind we don't want to let the player get through the game in an hour. There has been a lot of focus on this project to continue to time areas, and find out where areas are running long or running short. In a game so bite-sized, every moment is important and needs to be well planned.



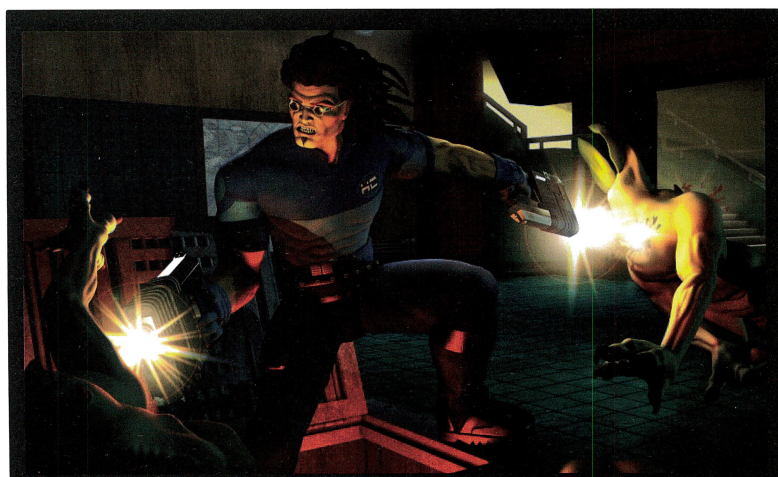
**play: Is it difficult to strike a balance between cutting-edge environmental art and interactive props, when you know a lot of the physics props will be displaced?**

**Robert:** Yes and no...the technology has advanced, which does come at a performance cost—for example, the real-time physics objects in the maps. To counterpoint these new limitations, we created a visual style which compliments the technology without compromising visuals within our pseudo-realistic SiN universe. Like the original SiN, there will be tons of interaction and visual candy.

**You're probably intimately familiar with the Source engine by now. What kind of stuff does Source handle really well for this project?**

Valve Software spent years developing the art pipelines and tools, many of which are very powerful. With their character tools for example, we were able to create some great character moments, not only from a visual perspective, but they are also compelling emotionally.

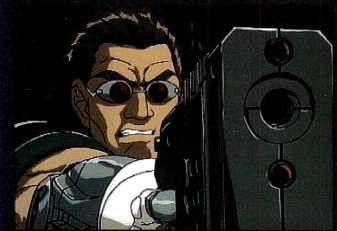
**Who is your favorite character in the SiN universe?**



Old school bonus: Colonel John Blade and his HardCorps team have been owning mutants since 1998's SiN. To help players get up-to-speed on the storyline, SiN Episodes will also include a free version of the original SiN game.

**What's more fun to layout: indoor or outdoor levels?**

I personally prefer working in more open-ended environments that gives the player lots of options. You can achieve this relatively easily with outdoor levels, with less confusion to the player as to where they need to go, and a lot more openness as to how they can proceed getting there. I believe you can also give the player these options in indoor environments—it just typically takes a lot more work. It is very easy for a player to get lost indoors in a game, as it can end up feeling maze-like, and a player will typically nitpick at artistic details in more enclosed environments. I think both have their place, and work well when meshed together properly. I'm much more a fan of non-linear open spaces though. **play**



Released in 2000, SiN: The Movie was a Japanese animation production largely funded by US anime house ADV Films. Though many of the series' characters were featured, liberties were taken with the game storyline.

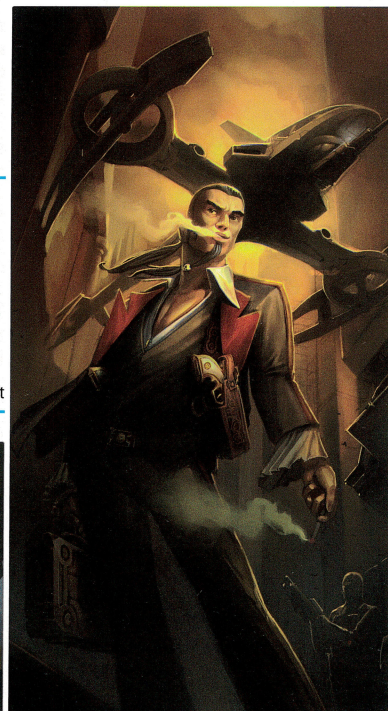


The SiN universe has a wide range of characters, from mutants to robots. There's just about something for everyone. Many of my favorite character designs will be introduced later in future Episodes. In Emergence, my favorite

character I designed is Jessica Cannon. Jessica has just the right amounts of what a female character should be: she is strong yet sensitive, sexy like the girl next door and can kick some major ass when necessary. **play**

"Jessica has just the right amounts of what a female character should be: she is strong yet sensitive, sexy like the girl next door and can kick some major ass when necessary."

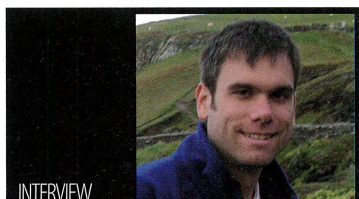
ROBERT ATKINS, Art Direct/Lead Art, Ritual Entertainment



Is that you, Cortana? Actress Jen Taylor, best known for her role as Cortana in the Halo series, provides the voice of Jessica Cannon in SiN Episodes. She tempers Jessica's discipline and confidence with a gentle smile.







INTERVIEW

Zak Belica, Audio Director/Sound/Music, Ritual Ent.

## Voices in the Crowd

**play:** How do the character voice performances in *SiN Episodes* compare to previous Ritual titles? We've heard it's your best material yet.

**Zak:** We're creating a rich storyline and world in *SiN Episodes*, and the voice actors are the single biggest way to convince players that what's happening in the game is 'real'. We were incredibly fortunate to have all the original *SiN* actors return: Hanna Logan as Elexis, Eric Mills as Blade, and Billy O'Sullivan as JC. We've also added some major new talent to the cast, including Jen Taylor as Jessica and David Sculley as Radek. All of the actors gave nuanced performances that really help the plot of the game. We also tried to create a performing environment where we could get the best out of our talent. For example, one of the game's main relationships is how the characters of Jessica and JC interact. To give their scenes realism and tension, we actually recorded the actors at the same time, so they could play off of each other. This is a common practice in TV and movies, but seldom done on game projects.

The game's soundtrack blossomed into a big project of its own. How important was it to set the tone for the series in *Emergence*, in terms of main musical themes and combat tunes?

My approach to the *SiN Episodes*: *Emergence* soundtrack was to follow a motion picture format for a strong genre and then work from there. I'll confess that John Barry's *Bond* themes and implementation have had an influence on me, in that I've created a theme song—called "What's The World Come To"—and a central instrumental theme that are referenced throughout the *SiN Episodes* score. I've been fortunate to be able to hire live players for the *SiN* music, including a singer, drummer, and string quartet. I find that using live talent gives my compositions more life and passion, and brings the music to the next level. Look for *SiN Episodes* music tracks to be released soon.

"...we actually recorded the actors at the same time, so they could play off of each other. This is a common practice in TV and movies, but seldom done on game projects."

Zak Belica, Audio Director/Sound/Music, Ritual Entertainment

Bio-geneticist, chemist and head of SinTEK Industries, by age 5 the sinister Elexis Sinclair had successfully cloned a frog. Unfortunately the mutated clone had the eyes of a human.



## SiN inspired by NIN?

Mr. Reznor took up residence on Zak's personal playlist during production of the *Emergence* soundtrack.

**What albums were you listening to during this project?**

I try and keep an open ear while working, so it's always a mix of genres:

- Classical: Film soundtracks, Mussorgsky and Bach.
- World: Arabica and Cuban.
- Techno: Soulwax, Vitalic and Goldfrapp.
- Rock: NIN, Vines and Cars.





## NEWS

### The Reign of DS Japan 2005 Sales Report



**Yodobashi Camera in Akihabara:** "All colors of DS sold out. We do not know when more stock will arrive." A Nintendo system has literally never sold out in Japan before.

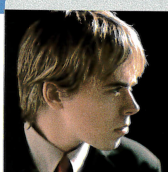
## NEWS

### Xbox360 Japan Update

When we last left the Xbox360, it had moved approximately 62,000 units, short of the anticipated 100,000 and even farther removed from the 124,000 systems the original Xbox sold during the same timeframe back in 2002. Many chalked this massive disparity up to the three-week delay Dead Or Alive 4 got handed with. So how did the release of Tomonobu Itagaki's Most Beautiful Thing In The World™ affect sales? A fairly decent amount, it would seem, with total system sales falling just shy of 100,000 as of press time. DOA4 itself sold 45,000 copies its first week -- a respectable number in a market where 100,000 units sold constitutes a hit, though significantly less than the 74,000 DOA3 sold during its first weekend. Three weeks after release, DOA4 has completely dropped out of the top 50, having sold through some 63,000 copies total. The other expected killer app, From Software's [eM] -eNCHANT arM-, shifted a touch under 20,000 units during its first week. Whatever spin one puts on the current situation, it can only be described as bleak. Though fast becoming the cliché to close out Xbox360-in-Japan-themed articles, we have little choice: Will one of Mistwalker's three 360-exclusive RPGs (Blue Dragon, Lost Odyssey, Cry On) save the system? Another high-profile title like Ninety-Nine Nights? Lost Planet? Bullet Witch? Only time will tell.



**Throngs of Japanese youths clamor for an exclusive item download in Animal Crossing DS at the World Hobby Fair '06.**



< Nick Des Barres

Pity poor Nick, who grew up in sunny southern California, never knowing what *cold* truly meant. It's his first winter in Japan, and it just happens to be a record cold wave, with temperatures dropping below zero daily (in Centigrade...not quite as dramatic as Fahrenheit, but still, like, freezing). Having never been around snow for more than a few hours at a time (and most of that time was admittedly spent in Kenji Eno's D2), Nick has gained newfound respect for mighty Mother Nature. But it's just as well, as fourth quarter 2005's gaggle of gaming umami keeps him parked solidly in front of the Sharp AQUOS. "Hot damn, the difference between games at 480i and 720p sure is *staggering*," muses Nick, "dropping two months' salary on a new HDTV was definitely the right choice." Hollow words when one considers his diet now consists of eyebrows and muddy water.

**Favorite genres:** RPGs, Action, Adventure, Fighting, Shooters  
**Now playing:** Kingdom Hearts II, [eM] -eNCHANT arM-, Rule Of Rose  
**Favorite mid-boss:** Final Great Soldier (Gunstar Heroes)



< Dai Kohama

Like the vast majority of Japanese gamers in these troubled times, Dai is affixed via umbilical cord to his beloved DS, and to a lesser extent, PSP. Despite the bevy of high-profile home games released this season, Dai just isn't feeling it, insisting that nothing can come close to the magic Nintendo provides on two three-inch screens. In other news, the theatrical anime *Stormy Night*, Play Japan's pick for best anime of 2005, has caused Dai to revert to childhood: He can't remember the last time he'd been to see a film five times during its theater run, and though he had forsworn cluttering up his apartment with useless merchandise years ago, he has spent tens of thousands of yen amassing *Story Night* goods on Yahoo! Japan Auctions, blasting the soundtrack album on endless repeat. Please, someone stop him.

**Favorite genres:** Action, Shooters, Other  
**Now playing:** Animal Crossing DS, Monster Hunter Portable  
**Favorite mid-boss:** Yoshitsune (Genpei Tounamed)

## CHART

01	Come On! Animal Forest (Animal Crossing: Wild World)	Nintendo	DS	1,170,000
02	Gran Turismo 4	SCE	PS2	1,067,000
03	Brain Exercise DS Training For Adults Produced By Professor Ryuta Kawashima Of Tohoku University New Industry Creation Hatchery Center	Nintendo	DS	1,011,000
04	nintendogs (Shiba & Friends, Dachshund & Friends, Chihuahua & Friends)	Nintendo	DS	966,000
05	World Soccer Winning Eleven 9	Konami	PS2	923,000
06	Shin Sangoku Musou 4 (Dynasty Warriors 5)	Koei	PS2	918,000
07	Soft Head Cram School (Brain Flex)	Nintendo	DS	875,000
08	Tamagotchi's Petit Shoptchi	Bandai	DS	770,000
09	Kingdom Hearts II	Square-Enix	PS2	740,000
10	Mario Kart DS	Nintendo	DS	670,000

### 2005 Japan Top Ten Sales

This list only accounts for sales in 2005. As of late January, Tamagotchi, nintendogs, Soft Head Cram School, and Kingdom Hearts II have all cleared the one million mark, Animal Forest seems set to hit two million units early this year, and the sequel to Adult DS Training For Brain Exercise Produced By Professor Ryuta Kawashima Of Tohoku University New Industry Creation Hatchery Center, titled aptly enough More Brain Exercise DS Training For Adults Produced By Professor Ryuta Kawashima Of Tohoku University New Industry Creation Hatchery Center, also released in 2005, is inching up on platinum status as well.



System(s)	PlayStation 2	Publisher	SCEJ	Available	Now (Japan)
Developer	Level-5	Online/Multi	None	ESRB Rating	NA

GAME REVIEW

# Rogue Galaxy

words Casey Loe

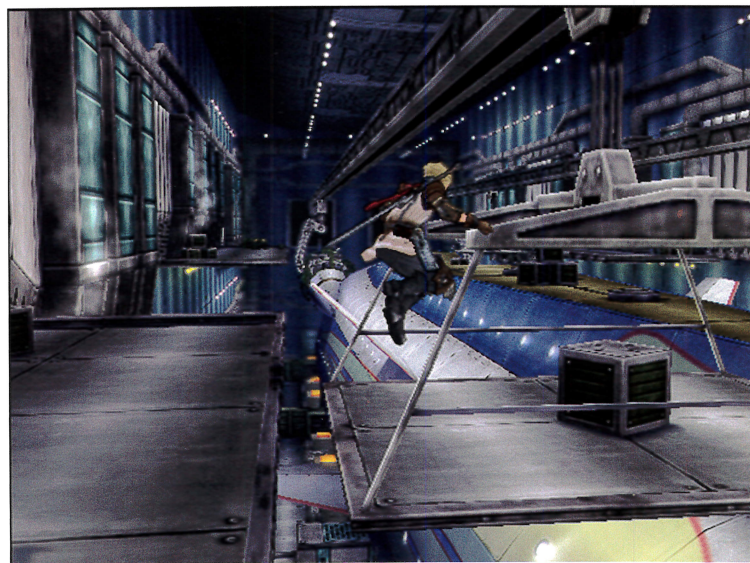
An RPG Without a roman numeral!?

The release of *Rogue Galaxy* is cause for celebration, simply because it's a breath of fresh air in the otherwise stagnant PlayStation 2 RPG market. The PS2 has seen some fantastic sequels, but even gamers who have lost most of their fingers in wood shop accidents can count the number of *original* RPGs on a single mangled hand. But if anyone has the clout to get a new high-budget RPG series off the ground, it's Level-5, the talented developer that revitalized the *Dragon Quest* franchise while hilariously punking Xbox owners with that whole *True Fantasy Live* thing.

*Rogue Galaxy* may look an awful lot like *DQ8*, but outside of some variations on that game's Alchemy system, the two titles have surprisingly little in common. It's to Level-5's credit that they chose to take their impressive game engine in a drastically different direction, but it's a shame that they didn't learn more from the experience of working with the seasoned experts at Square-

Enix. *Dragon Quest* producer Yuji Horii knows how to pace a 60+ hour game that doesn't feel bogged down with 40 hours of filler, but the *Rogue Galaxy* team... Well, not so much.

*Rogue Galaxy*'s greatest innovation is replacing *DQ*'s turn-based combat with zippy real-time action scenes. Each character wields both a melee weapon and a projectile, with a control scheme that is pleasantly reminiscent of *Devil May Cry*. You may control any character you choose, while the computer uses your other two party members. Instead of automatically wasting all your good items and ability points,





your party members kindly ask your permission before they do anything other than attack, and you may ascent or decline with a tap of a button. The problem of over-zealous computer-controlled allies wasting resources has plagued pseudo-action RPGs like *Star Ocean* and the *Tales* series, and the suggestion system is one of the best solutions I've seen.

As fun as the battles are for the first few hours, they grow repetitive fairly quickly. Your characters never learn any new attacks, every weapon feels nearly identical, and the poorly-conceived ability system (which freezes the action to play a canned cut scene every time you cast a spell) is annoying and offers very little variety.

Speaking of monotony, *Rogue Galaxy* has some of the worst dungeon design I've ever seen in an RPG. Most areas are twice as long as they should be, mercilessly padded by repeating the same rooms over and over again. You can't interact with the environment in any way, save to jump over simple obstacles, and the puzzles are never any more complicated than finding the key for each locked door. (HINT - It's in the chest closest to the door!) The towns are a lot more interesting, since each is huge and many are quite imaginative, but the

incessant random encounters in some towns discourage exploration and blatantly violate Section V, Article 56 of the Geneva Convention. ("To the fullest extent of the means available to them, RPG developers shall keep towns, cities, and castles free of random enemy encounters, except for those deemed necessary to the advancement of game plots or subplots, or in those towns, cities, or castles that are explicitly haunted or overrun by an enemy power.")

*Rogue Galaxy's* storyline does offer some of the charm its dungeons lack. Main character Jester is a ranger in a backwater desert planet who briefly joins forces with a legendary bounty hunter to protect his town. When the bounty hunters realizes he's being pursued by a band of pirates, he gives his trademark equipment to Jester, who is only too happy to impersonate the legend and take his place on a planet-hopping quest. Much of the story is told in gorgeous cut scenes, although it quickly gets bogged down with a dozen subplots that you won't care one whit about. The game also has trouble

**"Much of the story is told in gorgeous cut scenes, although it quickly gets bogged down with a dozen subplots..."**



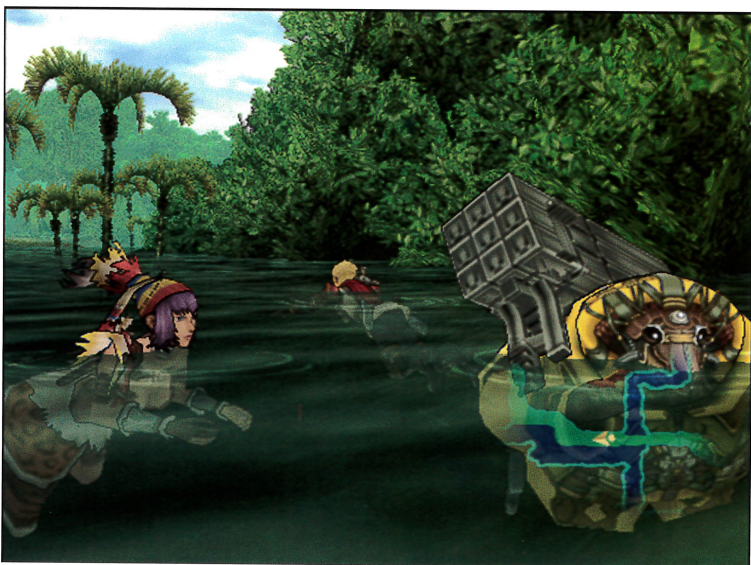
finding a consistent tone, populating a universe with absurdly campy characters (Tommy gun-toting, pinstriped Mafiosos... *in space!*) and then expecting us to take them seriously when the dramatic music starts playing.

While *Rogue Galaxy* misses the mark at times, it's still a title that I am eager to see released on these shores. It's certainly worth playing, provided you have a TV with a picture-in-picture function so you can watch CSI reruns during some of the interminable dungeon crawls. And its future prospects look bright—*Rogue Galaxy* sold a quarter of a million copies on its first week of release in Japan, so a sequel is all but inevitable. If Level-5 can drain the filler, cut out the extraneous subplots and add some variety to their promising battle system, *Rogue Galaxy* will be a franchise with a very bright future.

## Rogue Galaxy

score 7.5

- + Gorgeous graphics, fun battles, and an original flavor.
- Dungeons suck, weak ability system, and too little variety.

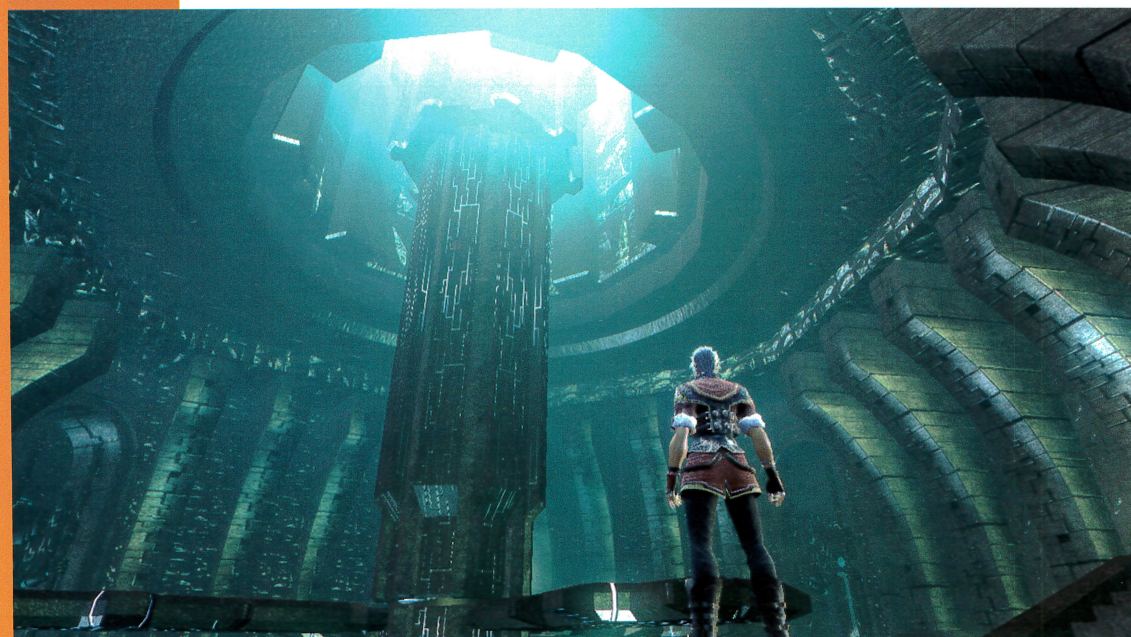




System(s)	Xbox360	Publisher	FromSoftware	Available	Now (Japan)
Developer	FromSoftware	Online/Multi	NA	ESRB Rating	NA

## GAME REVIEW

This is what the game looks like...all the time.



# [em]

## -eNCHANT arM-

FromSoftware gets their Square on

words Nick Des Barres

First, the good news. [eM] -eNCHANT arM- is arguably the best inaugural RPG for a system since Tengai Makyō on PC Engine CD-ROM². The bad news: Unlike that game, [eM] is no masterpiece...though it's far better than a launch RPG has any right to be.

FromSoftware's official genre classification for [eM] is "Regular RPG". Indeed, a more regular non-Square-Enix Japanese RPG has probably never before been made, as long as your barometer of regularity is a Yoshinori Kitase-produced Final Fantasy. Take a look at the screens on this spread...they might seem a little familiar. Is that Balamb Garden? The evil chick is totally Edea, right? Am I seeing Luca from FFX? All the signage, that's the FFX font, right? Did Tetsuya Nomura design these characters? Why does the dude in red have Yuna's bicolored eyes and Squall's forehead scar? Well, friends, I have a simple and elegant answer to these questions. I imagine there was a conversation between Microsoft and From that went something like this:

"Hello, we like your Otogi, it was very nice, very pretty, won't you make us a Final Fantasy for our Xbox360 launch?"

"An RPG? We'll, you've come to the right place. We're famous for our launch RPGs. In fact, we had the first RPGs for PlayStation, PlayStation 2, and GameCube. Perhaps you'd like a dungeon crawler like King's Field or Eternal Ring..."

"No, we want Final Fantasy."

"Third person, eh? Something a little more EverGrace-y?"

"Final Fantasy."

"But surely the Xbox360 will be all about innovation? May we suggest something with a unique game system, like Rune?"

"Final Fantasy."

"But...isn't Mistwalker basically making Final

**"Indeed, a more regular non-Square-Enix Japanese RPG has probably never before been made..."**

Fantasy already?"

"Yes. And so are you. Here is ten million dollars."

"Yes, sir."

And that was that. Speculative, to be sure, but you know that's more or less the size of it. To From's credit, they do a very good Square impression. Even the story...um...borrows quite a lot from the Final Fantasy oeuvre: A cataclysmic, magical war 1,000 years ago nearly wiped out civilization, though ever-plucky humanity sprung back and have established a new golden age of civilization through technology (War of the Magi, FFXVI). You play as Atsuma, a youth attending an elite military academy (Squall, FFXVIII) which,



of course, has an ancient evil sealed beneath it (NORG/Balamb Garden, FFXIII). Before long your hometown is leveled (Cloud, FFXII) by said evil, the Queen of Ice, a sentient "Devil Golem" from the apocalyptic Golem Wars 1,000 years previous. To add insult to injury, your best friend/rival, Touya, is spirited away and becomes the Queen's loyal companion (Seifer/Edea, FFXIII). After narrowly escaping thanks to Atsuma's mysterious right arm, later revealed to be part Devil Golem (main character shares DNA with main villain, Cloud/Sephiroth, FFXII), you meet up with a tomboyish runaway princess named Karin (Dagger, FFXI), who's part of a resistance movement (Returners/Avalanche, FFXI and XII) against the Crown, and her bodyguard, Raiga, a former Captain of the Royal Knights (Steiner, FFXI) whose top priority is protecting her. Every single plot element and character may be borrowed from another game, but they are stitched together seamlessly. In many ways, [eM] is something of an RPG throwback. The story and characters are delightfully unpretentious, everyone is genially likable, and there are no heavy-handed themes being shoved down our throats. From beginning to end [eM] offers few surprises, but it's kind of like comfort food for the longtime J-RPG aficionado: Satisfying but familiar.

Gameplay fares much the same. The bulk of the game is standard town-dungeon-town linearity right up until the end, when a few optional bits become available, but it rarely if ever bogs down in filler. [eM] is nothing if not formulaic, but it is excellently paced. I always had a genuine interest in what happened next, and the excellent, if prosaic, characterization and interplay between party members is always entertaining. Despite all this teeming regularity, however, [eM] does in fact sport a few sparks of innovation, mostly revolving around the battle and character growth systems. Resembling a pared-down, sped-up version of the grid-based battles from a traditional Japanese SRPG like *Shining Force*, even the most minor of random encounters requires thinking and strategy -- you'll never be able to win by just mashing the A button. Each character can only attack within certain ranges, and their random placement on the battlefield always ensures you have to plan out your movements carefully. It's a bit like a board game, actually. Adding to the fun are over 100 Golems you can collect, Gotta Catch 'Em All™-style, which can be swapped in and out of your party at any time. Your human party members are generally more powerful than the Golems, but due to the interesting conceit of the Vitality Point system -- characters regain full health after each battle but lose VP -- you'll have to use them, as a character with zero VP cannot participate in battle. This becomes especially important during long dungeons, when you're usually going to want to save your stronger human characters for the latter half. Winning battles nets you experience and raises levels, but your characters (and Golems) also accrue points that can be used to power up however you please -- boost HP, individual stats, or learn new skills, it's your choice. It's sort of like a less-involving version of FFX's Sphere Board System,



but with more freedom.

Now what about those graphics? There's little I can say that the screens on these pages don't. Yes, that's what the game looks like, all the time. These are all realtime shots. Everything in [eM] absolutely screams next generation, especially if you're playing in high definition. The sheer variety of locales and characters pretty much makes this game the default best-looking game on the fledgling platform, though the quality can vary significantly. Most areas are absolutely breathtaking, but there are a few that could really only classify as "quite hideous." One is tempted to think From simply ran out of time.

While on the topic of graphics, I must take this opportunity to air a pet peeve I've developed with Xbox360 games. People, please, go easy on the normal mapping. There's no need to dial the specularity up to 1,000 just because you can. Is it just me, or are the first crop of 360 games reminiscent of early-90s prerendered PC adventure games, stone and brick and cloth and wood alike seemingly covered in saran wrap? Come on, you know you have a problem when even the *desert sands* look like they've been rubbed down with vaseline. Ah well, it's a small complaint when the visuals are this sumptuous.

[eM] is most impressive when placed in its proper context: FromSoftware managed to craft a sprawling, 60-hour-long, traditional J-RPG on a next-generation platform in an incredibly short amount of time...and it's actually pretty darn good. It may be a game we've all played a hundred times before, but as I say, I think it's probably the best launch RPG in fifteen years. I wouldn't recommend running out and buying a Japanese Xbox360 just to play it, as it seems safe to say it'll eventually get released in English (though a stereotypically



**"People, please, go easy on the normal mapping. There's no need to dial the specularity up to 1,000 just because you can."**

camp gay main character may present a bit of an impediment). No disrespect to From, who did a bang-up job here, but [eM] will probably be remembered as a game that offered a glimpse of the future -- a jumping-off point, if you will, for J-RPG gaming in the hi-def era.

[eM] -eNCHANT arM-

score **8.0**

- + Glorious next-generation visuals, classic J-RPG story and gameplay
- Overly classic J-RPG story and gameplay

[eM]'s roster of over 100 party members always keeps things interesting.





# RETURN

Nostalgia's sepia-toned graphics evoke a bygone age evoking a bygone age.



## Nostalgia 1907

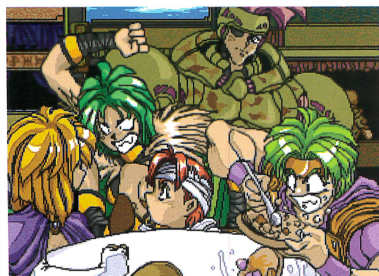
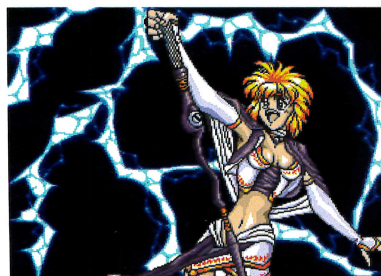
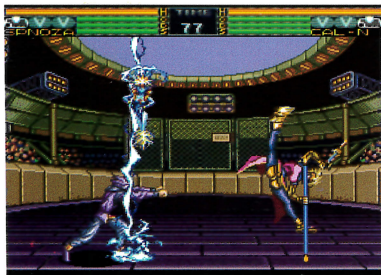
Nostalgia for Nostalgia

System(s)	Mega CD	Publisher	Takeru
Developer	Sur DéWave	Available	1991

I first encountered this legendary adventure game at the house of a friend who had just bought it from a vending machine. No kidding. During the early 90s, an innovative software distribution system called "Soft Vendor Takeru" was available in Japan, which had an at-the-time unusual internet connection and downloaded software direct to floppy. The Takeru business model may have failed miserably, but I'll always remember it for having introduced me to Nostalgia 1907. The version that spilled forth from the vending machine was for X68000, but I decided to wait for the Mega CD edition released a few months later, which featured full voice and a music CD. This turned out to be the right choice: Nostalgia was eventually released for four platforms, but the Mega CD version remains the best. Though a relatively simple affair — essentially a linear text adventure, notwithstanding innovations such as playing as multiple characters and one particularly memorable bomb-defusing sequence later

borrowed by Hideo Kojima for Policenauts — Nostalgia lives and breathes on the seemingly effortless way it conjures a mood, a wistfulness for a time we weren't alive to experience. In this game it's all about the story: You play as Kasuke Yamada, the lone Japanese aboard a luxurious passenger ship known as the Nostalgia, on a cruise in the north Atlantic. Everything is positively Belle Époque until a bomb explodes on board, crippling navigation. A mysterious communiqué is sent by a person identifying himself as the perpetrator, with one demand: Find the "Russian Mist", hidden somewhere aboard the Nostalgia, or another bomb will be detonated, sinking the ship and all on board. A quick investigation of bomb fragments from the initial explosion reveal the ordnance to be of Japanese manufacture, and immediately Kasuke is suspected. Just what is the Russian Mist? Can Kasuke stay alive? Can the Nostalgia be saved? If you can read Japanese and play Mega CDs, I strongly encourage you discover the answers for yourself. **Dai Kohama**

A more archetypal example of the early 90s PC Engine aesthetic would be hard to find.



## Flash Hiders

Classic anime battles

System(s)	PC Engine Super CD-ROM <sup>2</sup>	Publisher	Right Stuff
Developer	Right Stuff	Available	1993

There are three types of fighting games worth playing: Those with speed chess-esque tactical precision and unparalleled balance (Street Fighter III 3rd Strike, Virtua Fighter 2), those that compel more because of a meticulously crafted, unique game-world (Soul Calibur, Guilty Gear), and the rare example that gets both elements right (Vampire Hunter). Right Stuff's 1993 Flash Hiders falls solidly into the middle category, and having debuted a mere two years after Street Fighter II first hit arcades, it might be the first significant example of a fighting game with a fully fleshed-out backstory and three-dimensional characters. Indeed, the game's swords-and-sorcery plotline was its main selling point, as evidenced by the casting of major anime talent (Megumi Hayashibara, Hikaru Midorikawa), lush, full-screen, golden-age-of-PC Engine cinema scenes, and a story mode that defaults to auto control (!). This emphasis on characters and plot comes as little surprise, as the now-defunct Right Stuff will be remembered mainly for their RPGs (Alshark,

Fang of Alnam, the PC Engine version of Emerald Dragon), but gosh a' mighty did they come right out the gate with a fine fighting game. Working with the PC Engine Super CD-ROM<sup>2</sup>'s minuscule 2 megabits of RAM, Right Stuff managed to produce a game more visually appealing than most 18 Mbit Arcade Card games, cramming in large, detailed, well-animated characters, fancy (for the time) pyrotechnics, and SFII-style pseudo-3D linescrolling. More historically significant, however, is the long list of fighting game firsts later (wittingly or not) copied by other titles: A one-player story mode with skill progression, a shop, and different equippable weapons (Soul Edge), a guard gauge (Jojo's Bizarre Adventure), and guard cancels (Vampire). Right Stuff followed up in 1995 with a sequel on Super Famicom, Battle Tycoon, which offered embellished graphics but lost much of the original's charm due to the unavoidable excision of the anime cutscenes. The original article is far better, and is arguably the best fighting game ever released on PC Engine CD. **Nick Des Barres**



Sell by date: infinity

# FLASHBACK

## Flashback: The Quest for Identity

A trip worth remembering

System(s)	Sega CD	Publisher	U.S. Gold
Developer	Delphine Software	Available	1994

Freshly inspired to dig into my Sega CD collection after receiving a Sega CDX as a gift, the first game to go for a spin was Flashback—one of my all-time favorites. It had been years since I'd returned to what I remembered as a fantastically engaging adventure, and given that so many once-revered 16-bit games strike me as humorously antiquated today, I was ready for my usual reaction: play a level, enjoy the nostalgia, reflect on what made the game so good in its time, move on.

Several hours later, the end credits were rolling. What struck me about Flashback's ability to still grab me was the distinctly intensive platforming. More about incessant jumping and timing and rhythmic pattern recognition, the game possesses a signature approach to world interaction that is has very little to do with complexity of

control and movement. There's something great, and something that's lost today, in the tactile sensation of dancing through a sci-fi obstacle course. It's a game of pure, simple *gameplay* in the most old-school sense, and I loved it. Brady Fiechter

**There's something great, and something that's lost today, in the tactile sensation of dancing through a sci-fi obstacle course**



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and many more...

cover 1 of 2

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25

ANIME OF  
THE YEAR



25

## Viewtiful Joe

Geneon Entertainment

Like the game, Joe's anime has been better received in the US than Japan. Must be our love for super heroes, mutant freaks and damsels in distress. It doesn't hurt that the entire affair is completely unhinged either. Henshin a go-go baby!



24

## Yugo The Negotiator

ADV Films

A little bit MacGyver, a little bit Jack Ryan, Yugo brings international drama to the small screen, thinking on his feet to get prisoners home safe. A one man tour-de-force who relies on his brains rather than a gun, this title is a sleeper cell of a gem that demands to be seen.



22

## The Melody of Oblivion

Geneon Entertainment

Long after winning the war against the "monsters," the people of Earth's complacency comes back to bite them in the backside. Only the Warriors of Melos and their mighty moto-steeds can save the day in this unique, nicely paced sci-fi series.

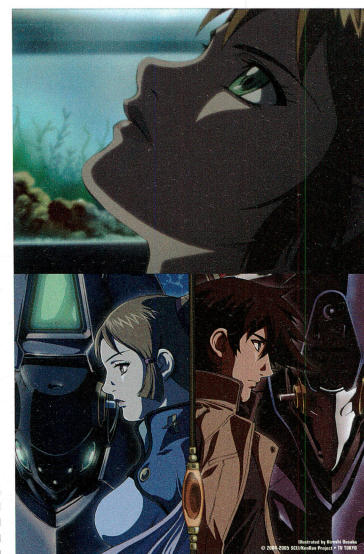


23

## Tetsujin 28

Geneon Entertainment

Known in these parts as Gigantor, this more serious modern day adaptation still manages to retain the series campy overtones while delivering a chilling post-war struggle. No sign of Dick Strong yet though.



21

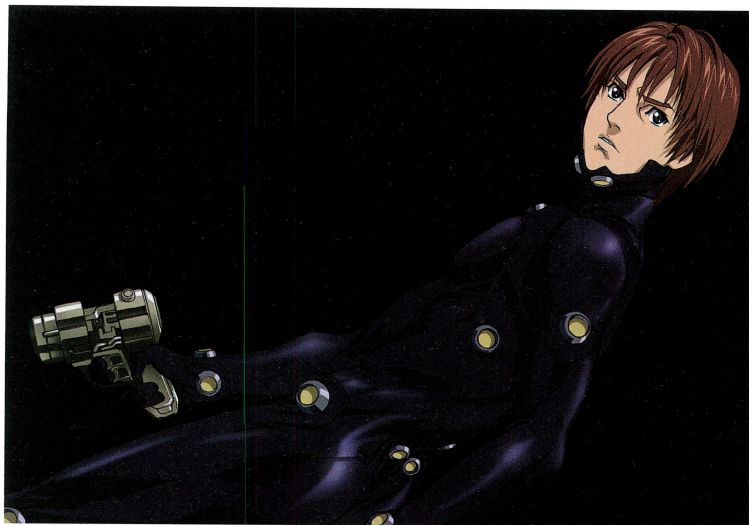
## Mars Daybreak

Bandai Entertainment

Any anime that takes place within the oceans of Mars and features a talking bipedal dolphin is top-notch in our book. Doesn't hurt that there's a saucy (and dangerous) love triangle either.







## 20 Gantz

ADV Films

Life after death is no walk in the park. In Gonzo's Gantz (presented in un-edited form, so hide the kiddies) it's a grotesque high stakes kill or be killed battle royal where the fallen are replaced by fresh meat for the grinder as fodder for the inhuman puppet master playing with their souls.



## 18 Applesseed

Geneon Entertainment

While the character designs don't mirror Masamune Shirow's original, there's no denying that Applesseed set a new benchmark for CGI anime, and the mirage of a utopian society teetering on the brink of anarchy never gets old.



## 19 Steamboy

Columbia Tristar Home Entertainment

One of, if not *the* most beautiful animated films ever created, don't let Steamboy's odd choice of subject matter deter you from a visual feast, and vocal performances second to none. Otomo and company are true masters.



## 17 Madlax

ADV Films

If Solid Snake ever took a wife, it'd be Madlax. Too bad she's on a collision course with destiny that, while slow paced, encompasses action, drama, and sci-fi and manages to be gripping at every turn.



## 16 Planetes

Bandai Entertainment

A more accurate depiction of what life might really be like in space (if you're the janitor), Planetes is both beautiful and filled with abundant rich storylines.







15

## Ah! My Goddess TV

Media Blasters

The Goddess that fell to Earth—into the arms of a college student on a budget that couldn't get a date if it knocked on his door—Belldandy finally made her US TV debut, and sticky sweet fantasy will never be quite the same.



10

## Elfen Lied

ADV Films

When a beautiful, naked, horned female—part of a master race locked away for humanity's survival and capable of tearing humans to pieces from 20 meters—escapes and washes up on a beach with amnesia, so begins one of the most heartfelt and compelling sci-fi dramas ever told.

11

## Area 88

ADV Films

Gamers who remember the Capcom shooter of the same name will be happy to know that the anime is on par with the classic side-scroller. The best aerial action and drama since Macross Plus, Area 88 was easily one of the biggest surprises of 2005.

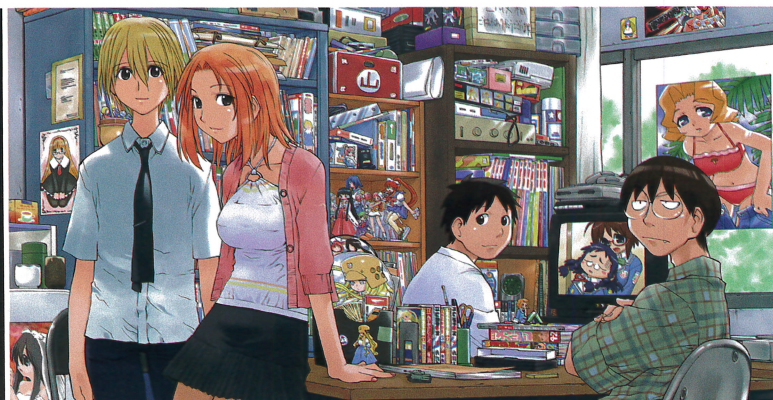


14

## Genshiken

Media Blasters

As if the life of an Otaku isn't difficult enough, toss in a dysfunctional college club on the brink of expulsion and a significant other that would like to see the whole gang six feet under so she can have her boyfriend back and you've got a comedy with more twists than an Elvis convention.



## 13 Burst Angel

FUNimation Entertainment

Although Burst Angel ultimately falls on the shoulders of Jo (a.k.a. the Angel from Hell) and Jango (her mech on demand) there's no denying the allure of the fantastic feminine four and their unwitting chef/ target Kyohei... not to mention the coolest RV on the planet.

12

## Gunslinger Girl

FUNimation Entertainment

The story of little girls cast out and reprogrammed to serve as assassins, Gunslinger Girl was the year's most bittersweet drama. At times hard to watch, its depiction of the human spirit alone makes it a must-see slice of animated life.







## 09 Full Metal Panic? Fumoffu

ADV Films

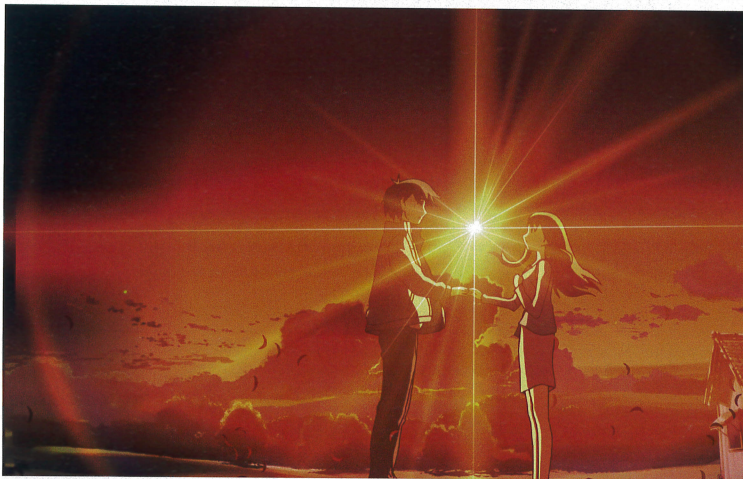
For round two between Kaname and Sousuke, on the heels of their military escapades, we find the ever-vigilant stoic (and dangerous) mercenary once again way too close to Kaname (and the rest of the faculty, students, and surrounding area) for comfort. Then everybody gets naked.



## 07 Ghost in the Shell Stand Alone Complex 2nd Gig

Manga/Bandai Entertainment

You could say "been there, done that" about 2<sup>nd</sup> Gig, if only the producers didn't keep raising the bar. It's becoming hard to imagine life without our monthly dose of Stand Alone Complex. Masamune Shirow's vision has become an indelible mark on science fiction as much as, if not more than, anything that has preceded it, live action or otherwise and Production I.G. deserves a medal.



## 08 A Place Promised in Our Early Days

ADV Films

The sense of melancholy, lost innocence, and fond recollection this beautiful film bestows on the viewer is a testament to how moving animated features can be. Too special for words, it must be experienced to be fully appreciated.



## 06 Samurai 7

FUNimation Entertainment

We've heard it said that the animated series is too far removed from the original work, to which we say; okay, maybe you have a point. However, that doesn't change the fact that the overall premise is one and the same nor that it is one of the most beautiful, compelling, and well paced sci-fi series ever seen or told. Absolutely beautiful: a breathtaking and bold take on a premise that transcends decades.





## 05 Godannar

ADV Films

At first glance Godannar may look like just another giant robot vs. earth invaders saga, but closer examination reveals deep storylines involving loss, romance, divinity, camaraderie, and every other emotion in the pile on top of TV animation second to none. So far it's got all the making of a "fun" Evangelion: Currently on Volume 3, only time will tell where Anna and Goh's fate lies.



## 04 Gilgamesh

ADV Films

Eloquent doesn't begin to describe the look of Gilgamesh, anime's gift to gothic sci-fi, horror, fantasy and drama. So mesmerizing, beautifully paced, and twisting is the story that it defies to be placed in any category. Life under the mirrored sky, a battle between races, and underlying tones that shake the very foundations of the human condition make Gilgamesh an anime like no other.



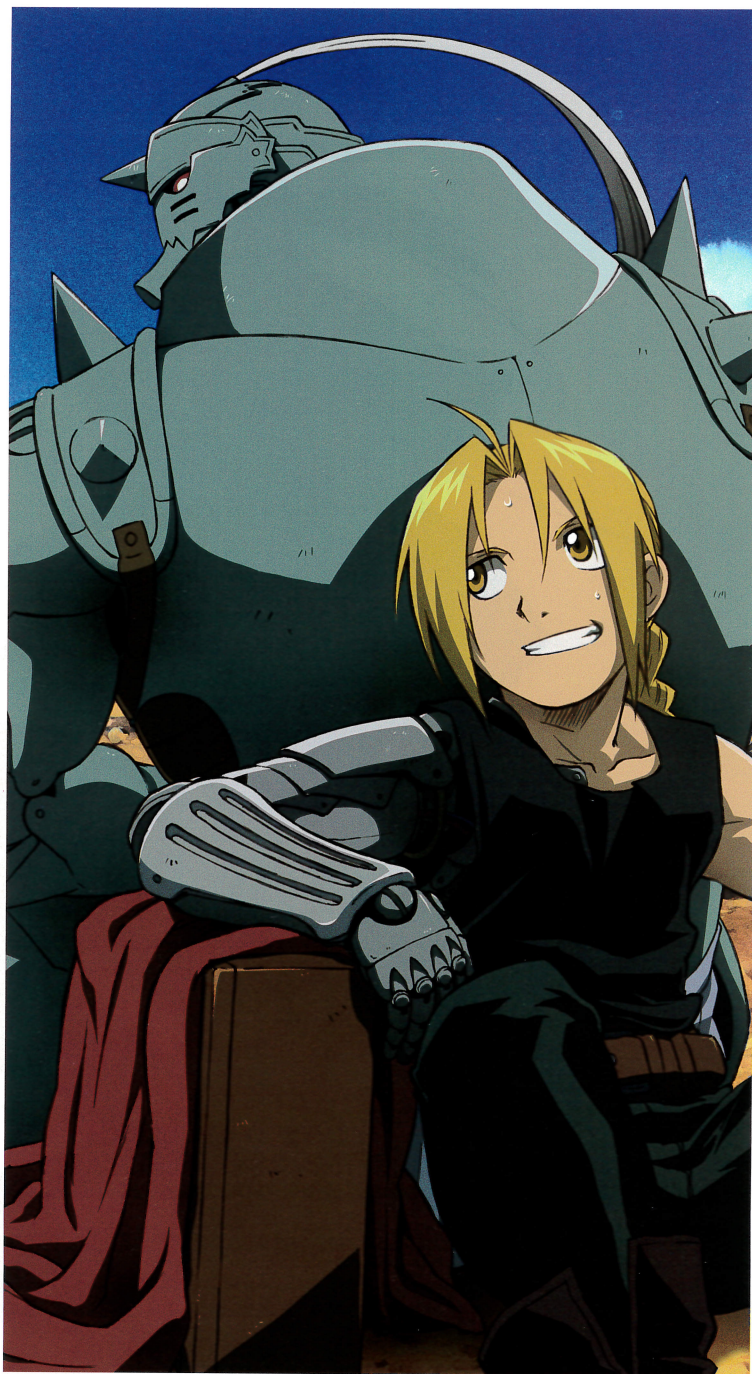




### 03 Gankutsuou The Count of Monte Cristo

Geneon Entertainment

Take the legendary novel of revenge, throw it into the future, add professional costume design and an unmatched psychoactive look, and you've got the unrivaled drama of the year.



### 02 Full Metal Alchemist

FUNimation Entertainment

A show of hands for everybody who wants to see Al sans armor... At times, thought provoking, at times funny and at times utterly tragic, many consider Full Metal Alchemist—two brothers' quest for redemption after disobeying the rules of alchemy (equal exchange) and its chilling results —the best anime series ever. We're inclined to agree with the stipulation of "one of" in there due to the likes of Cowboy BeBop, Neon Genesis Evangelion and this year's top dog...





# SAMURAI CHAMPLOO

Geneon Entertainment

Mugen, Jin, and Fuu: Three distinctly different personalities thrown together by fate and on the trail of a Samurai who smells like sunflowers. Doesn't sound like much... until you begin to wade through the many layers of what is the single best "trek" tale ever told. Über-cool, infused with a hip-hop vibe that only the Japanese could conjure and bar none the most fluid fight scenes of any series, Samurai Champloo is the very definition of edgy, cool entertainment. No mere mortal that lays eyes on it could ever resist its rhythmic allure. Shows like this are the reason why "anime" needs to bust out of its niche and into the mainstream. Tell a friend; hell, tell a few.

01

ANIME  
OF THE YEAR



Last minute preparations have been made, as the impending battle for Kanna draws near. The Nobuseri will not stop until Kanna Village is completely annihilated. In the furious climax, not all of the samurai will survive.

DVD of the Year - Anime Insider

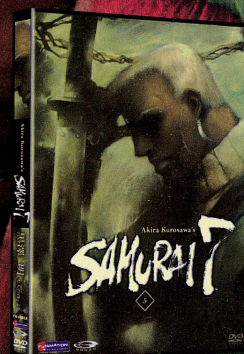
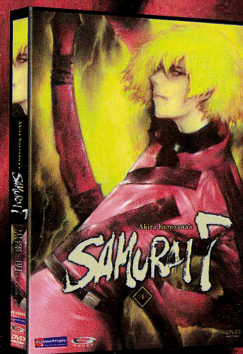
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## ANIME CATEGORY WINNERS

### ACTION/ADVENTURE ANIME OF THE YEAR

#### The Nominees...

Samurai Champloo // Samurai Gun // Madlax // Area 88 // Grenadier

#### The Winner...

**Samurai Champloo**

Geneon Entertainment



### FIGHTING ANIME OF THE YEAR

#### The Nominees...

Tenjiho Tenge // Street Fighter Alpha Generations // Baki The Grappler // Avatar: The Last Air Bender // Zatch Bell

#### The Winner...

**Tenjiho Tenge**

Geneon Entertainment



### HORROR ANIME OF THE YEAR

#### The Nominees...

Gilgamesh // Petite Cossette // Ghost Talkers Daydream // Elfen Lied // Kakurenbo: Hide and Seek

#### The Winner...

**Gilgamesh**

ADV Films



### MECHA ANIME OF THE YEAR

#### The Nominees...

Godannar // Overman King Gainer // Gravion Zwei // New Getter Robo // Tetsujin 28

#### The Winner...

**Godannar**

ADV Films



### FANTASY ANIME OF THE YEAR

#### The Nominees...

Full Metal Alchemist // Ahi My Goddess // Moby Dick // Scrapped Princess // Mythical Detective Loki Ragnarok

#### The Winner...

**Full Metal Alchemist**

FUNimation Entertainment



### COMPLETE COLLECTION ANIME OF THE YEAR

#### The Nominees...

Astro Boy (2003) Complete Collection // Macross Plus The Collection // Ninja Scroll The Series Box Set // Robotech Protoculture Collection // Neon Genesis Evangelion Platinum Complete

#### The Winner...

**Macross Plus The Collection**

Manga Entertainment



### COMEDY ANIME OF THE YEAR

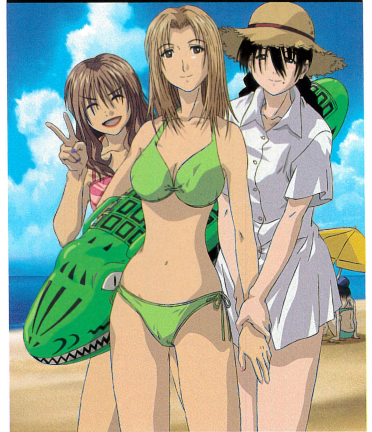
#### The Nominees...

Genshiken // Full Metal Panic! Fumoffu // Ghost Stories // Cromartie High School // Doki Doki School Hours

#### The Winner...

**Genshiken**

Media Blasters



### DRAMA ANIME OF THE YEAR

#### The Nominees...

Gunslinger Girl // Gankutsuou: The Count of Monte Cristo // Steamboy // My Beautiful Marie // Otogi Zoshi

#### The Winner...

**Gankutsuou  
The Count of Monte Cristo**

Geneon Entertainment



### SCI-FI ANIME OF THE YEAR

#### The Nominees...

Samurai 7 // Planetes // Ghost in the Shell: SAC 2nd GIG // Burst Angel // Starship Operators

#### The Winner...

**Samurai 7**

FUNimation Entertainment



### BEST SPECIAL EFFECTS

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Geneon Entertainment





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## BEST NEW CHARACTER FEMALE

### Nominees...

Fuu~Samurai Champloo // Jo~Burst Angel // Rushuna~Grenadier // Aya Natsume~Tenjho Tenge // Anna Aoi~Godannar

### The Winner...

**Fuu**  
Samurai Champloo



Anna's bold, no-nonsense, can hold her own, and has to put up with the mother of all mothers; Aya's the best fighter, most confused, and biggest babe of the bunch; Rushuna is quiet, cute and extremely deadly, Jo's out to save the world while dealing with a dark past; and Fuu (who makes up for her slight frame with fervent pluck) has her hands way over-full with Jin and Mugen. All of these fine women deserve a round of applause but Fuu's the one we'd most like to hang out with.

## VIDEO GAME-BASED ANIME OF THE YEAR

### The Nominees...

Viewtiful Joe // Star Ocean EX // Street Fighter Alpha Generations // Wild Arms

### The Winner...

**Viewtiful Joe**  
Geneon Entertainment



## CLASSIC/REVIVAL ANIME OF THE YEAR

### The Nominees...

Astro Boy: A Hero for All Ages // Gatchaman Collectors' Edition Box Sets // Original Dirty Pair OVA Collection // Magic Knight Rayearth Economy Box

### The Winner...

**Gatchaman Collectors' Ed Box Sets**  
ADV Films



## BEST NEW CHARACTER MALE

### Nominees...

Le Comte de Monte Cristo~Gankutsuou // Ed~Full Metal Alchemist // Mugen~Samurai Champloo // Tatsuya~Gigamesh // Joe~Viewtiful Joe

### The Winner...

**Mugen**  
Samurai Champloo



Tough company: The Count is oh so suave, Ed's dealing with the loss of not only his mother but select appendages and his brother's body, Tatsuya's father is a global terrorist attempting to replace the human race, Joe's been sucked into a movie world full of super-freaks, and Mugen has somehow been dragged into a quest for a Samurai who smells like sunflowers accompanied by a guy he wants to kill and a girl that drives him crazy. Lucky for us he knows how to blow off steam like a Samurai possessed.

## BEST MOVIE/OVA

### The Nominees...

Steamboy // Applesseed // A Place Promised in Our Early Days // Porco Rosso // Lupin The 3rd: Dead or Alive

### The Winner...

**A Place Promised in Our Early Days**  
ADV Films



## BEST OPENING THEME

### The Nominees...

~"Open Your Mind" by Yoko Ishida (Ah! My Goddess TV)  
~"Bomb A Head!" by m.c.A.T (Tenjho Tenge)  
~"Rise" by Origa (GGS SAC 2nd Gig)  
~"Battlery" by Nujabes feat. SHINGO2 (Samurai Champloo)  
~"Could This Be Love?" by Mikuni Shimokawa (FMP! Fumoffu)  
~"Lilium" by Kayo Konishi and Yukio Kondoh (Elfen Lied)

### The Winner...

**"Lilium" by Kayo Konishi and Yukio Kondoh**  
Elfen Lied

The feel good winner is clearly Fumoffu's "Could This Be Love" while the best hip hop goes to Tenjho Tenge's "Bomb Ahead" and the most heartfelt to Elfen Lied's "Lilium". It's a highly subjective category for sure.

## BEST FAN SERVICE

### The Nominees...

Divergence Eve // Tenjho Tenge // Daphne in the Brilliant Blue // Girls Bravo // Godannar

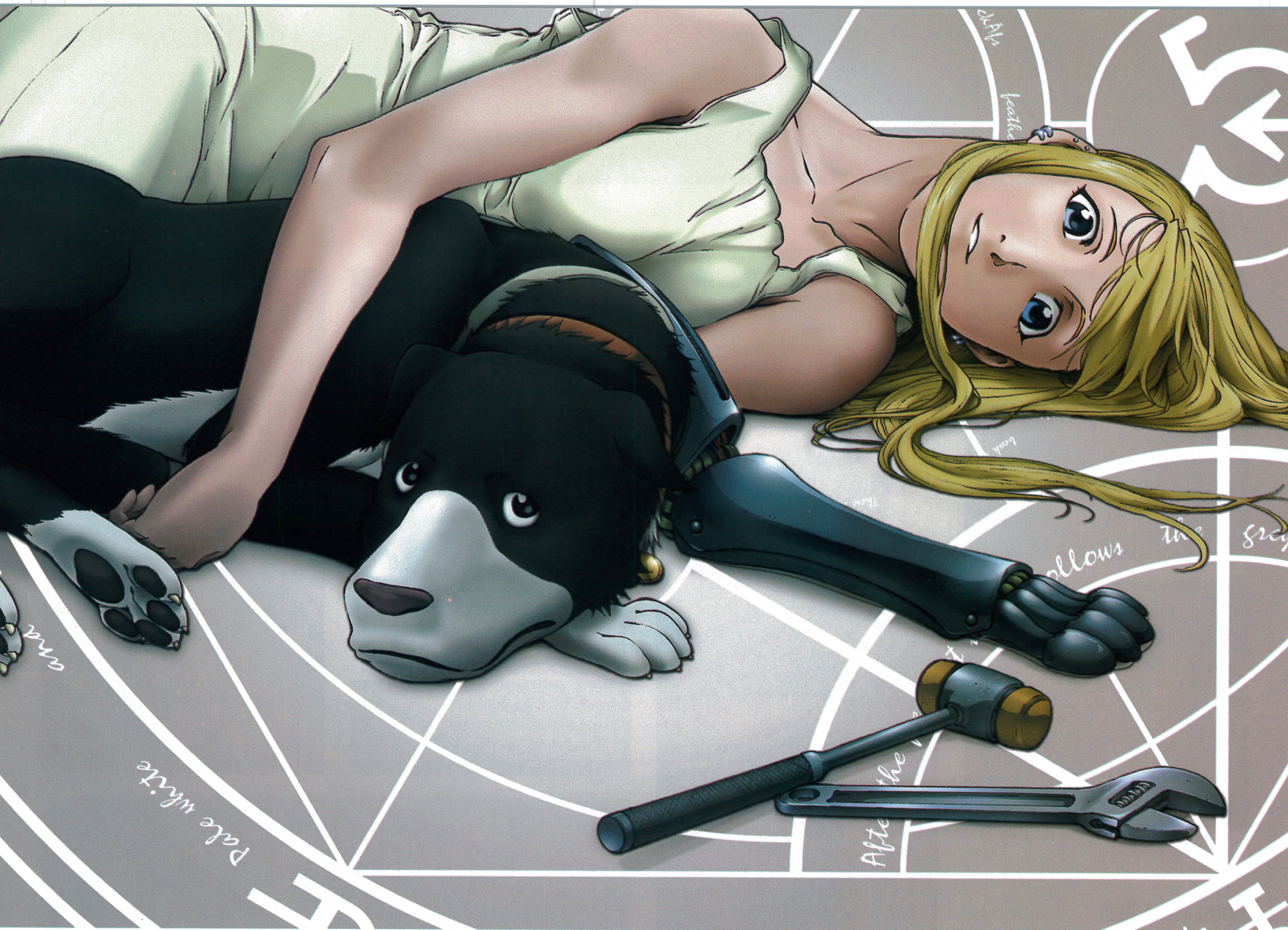


### The Winner...

**Godannar**  
ADV Films

Fan Service is particularly welcome when the show doesn't rely on it.





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## ANIME CATEGORY WINNERS

### BEST FIGHT

**Jin vs. Mugen**

Samurai Champloo



### BEST TV SERIES

ANIME OF THE YEAR

**The Nominees...**

Zatch Bell // Viewtiful Joe // IGPX //

Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex 2nd Gig // Naruto

**The Winner...**

**Ghost in the Shell**  
Stand Alone Complex 2nd Gig

Manga/Bandai Entertainment

### BEST SPECIAL VOLUME

**Ghost in the Shell**  
Stand Alone Complex 2nd Gig

Manga/Bandai Entertainment

There's no resisting Bandai/Manga's 2nd Gig Vol. 1 SE Box with soundtrack and tin. Also see Funimation's Samurai 7 SE boxes.



**Daphne in the Brilliant Blue**

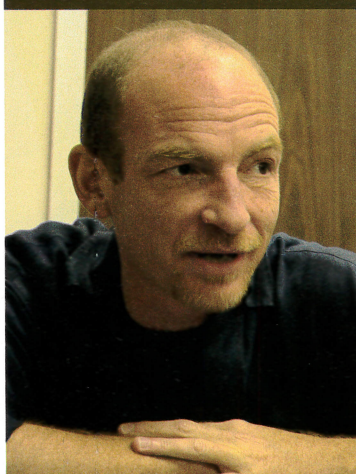
Geneon Entertainment

It's hard to argue with two half-naked action figures

### BEST PRODUCER

**Steve Foster**

ADV Films



The man who put the Milk in Chan and transformed this year's "Ghost Stories" from a children's show into a roll on the floor funny spook fest for all-ages, is truly gifted when it comes to adapting anime for the likes of us westerners. The polar opposite of his funnier fare, Steve's work on more serious works such as Gilgamesh, which he literally blesses for US consumption, make him the most versatile and gifted producer working in animation today.

### BEST VOCAL PERFORMANCE

MALE

**The Nominees...**

Vic Mignogna~Edward Elric (Full Metal Alchemist) //

Taylor Henry~Le Comte de Monte Cristo (Gankutsuou) //

Patrick Stewart~Lloyd Steam (Steamboy) // Daniel Andrews~Mugen

(Samurai Champloo) // Chris Patton~Sousuke Sagara (FMP! Fumofu)

**The Winner...**

**Daniel Andrews~Mugen**

Samurai Champloo

### BEST VOCAL PERFORMANCE

FEMALE

**The Nominees...**

Monica Rial~Jo (Burst Angel) // Anna Paquin~Ray Steam

(Steamboy) // Kari Wahlgrenas~Fuu (Samurai Champloo) // Jennifer

Proud~Deunan Knute (Appleseed) // Hilary Haag~Anna Aoi

(Godannar) // Shelley Calene-Black~Kiyoko (Gilgamesh)

**The Winner...**

**Anna Paquinas~Ray Steam**

Steamboy

### COOLEST ANIME TOY

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Xebec Toys



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While our prayers for a flying prop-headed Doraemon were finally answered, this year's finest figures were also on display.

### BEST LOCALIZATION

**Ghost Stories**

ADV Films



### BEST PACKAGE/SLEEVE DESIGN

**Burst Angel**

Funimation Entertainment

Almost too close to call between Burst Angel, Samurai Champloo and Gilgamesh. Our hats, caps, and hoods off to their respective art departments but there's just no resisting those scrumptious BA sleeves.



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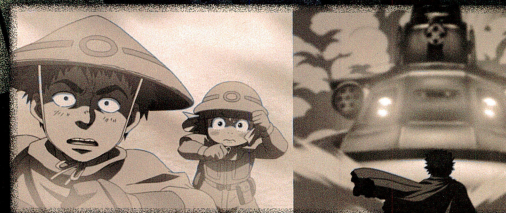
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## PERSONAL TOP 10

### Dave Halverson



## 01 ANIME OF THE YEAR

### Gilgamesh

ADV Films

- 02 Samurai Champloo Geneon Entertainment
- 03 Godannar ADV Films
- 04 A Place Promised in Our Early Days ADV Films
- 05 Elfen Lied ADV Films
- 06 Ghost in the Shell SAC 2nd Gig Bandai/Manga Entertainment
- 07 Fullmetal Alchemist FUNimation Entertainment
- 08 7 Samurai FUNimation Entertainment
- 09 Burst Angel FUNimation Entertainment
- 10 Gankutsuou: The Count of Monte Cristo Geneon Entertainment

### Jim Dewey



## 01 ANIME OF THE YEAR

### Gankutsuou

#### The Count of Monte Cristo

Geneon Entertainment

- 02 Samurai Champloo Geneon Entertainment
- 03 Cromartie High School ADV Films
- 04 Yugo the Negotiator ADV Films
- 05 Full Metal Alchemist FUNimation Entertainment
- 06 Shrine of the Morning Mist Media Blasters
- 07 A Place Promised in Our Early Days Geneon Entertainment
- 08 Gunslinger Girl FUNimation Entertainment
- 09 Area 88 ADV Films
- 10 Ghost Stories ADV Films

### Nelson Lui



## 01 ANIME OF THE YEAR

### Samurai Champloo

Geneon Entertainment

- 02 Genshiken Media Blasters
- 03 Jubei Chan 2: The Counterattack of Siberia Yagyu Geneon Entertainment
- 04 Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex 2nd Gig Manga/Bandai Entertainment
- 05 Full Metal Panic! Fumoffu ADV Films
- 06 Elfen Lied ADV Films
- 07 Godannar ADV Films
- 08 Full Metal Alchemist FUNimation Entertainment
- 09 A Place Promised in Our Early Days ADV Films
- 10 Madlax ADV Films

## play japan

## Anime Top 10

01



02

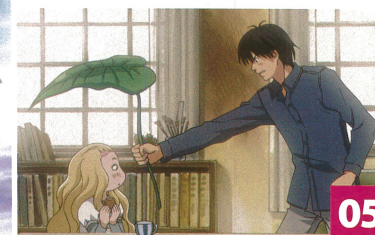


- 01. Stormy Night
- 02. Mobile Suit Zeta Gundam A New Translation: Heirs To The Stars
- 03. Noein: To Another You
- 04. Mobile Suit Zeta Gundam A New Translation II: Lovers
- 05. Honey & Clover
- 06. Basilisk: The Koga Ninja Scrolls
- 07. Mushishi
- 08. Gag Manga Biyori
- 09. BLOOD+
- 10. Symphonic Poem Eureka Seven

03



After debating endlessly on an official Play Japan 2005 Anime Top Ten, Nick and Dai finally arrived at the list above. We realize many of the entries may induce a major "WTF", as none of them have yet been released in America...but then again, when it comes to anime, the editors of Play Japan are living in the future. Rest assured you'll be seeing many of these works translated in 2006. Of special note is Gisaburo Sugii's (Night On The Galactic Railroad, Street Fighter II Movie) Stormy Night, which proves anime doesn't necessarily need guns, explosions, magic, swords, dragons or breasts to entertain...and move. We challenge even the most hardened anime fan not to get misty-eyed at this brilliant tale of friendship triumphing over all odds.



05



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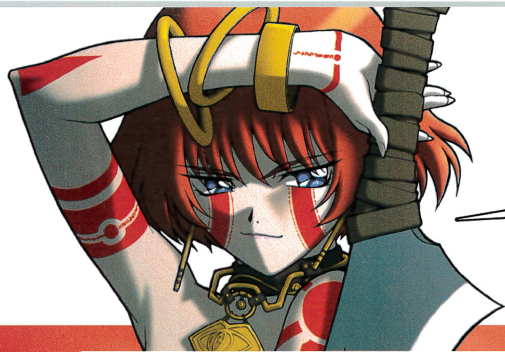
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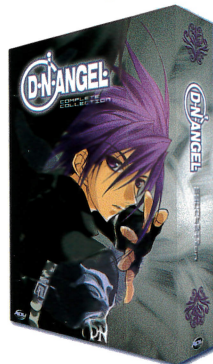
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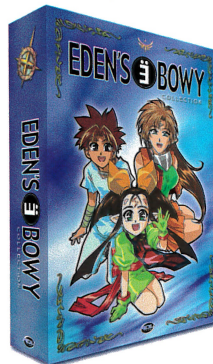
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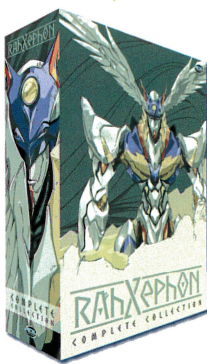
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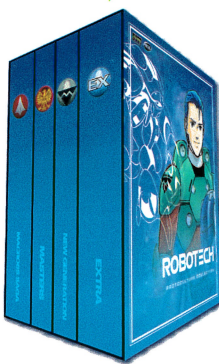
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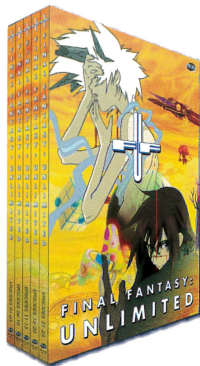
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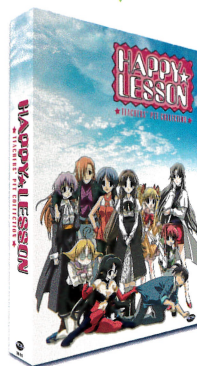
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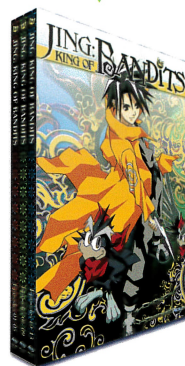
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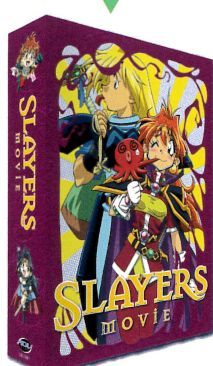
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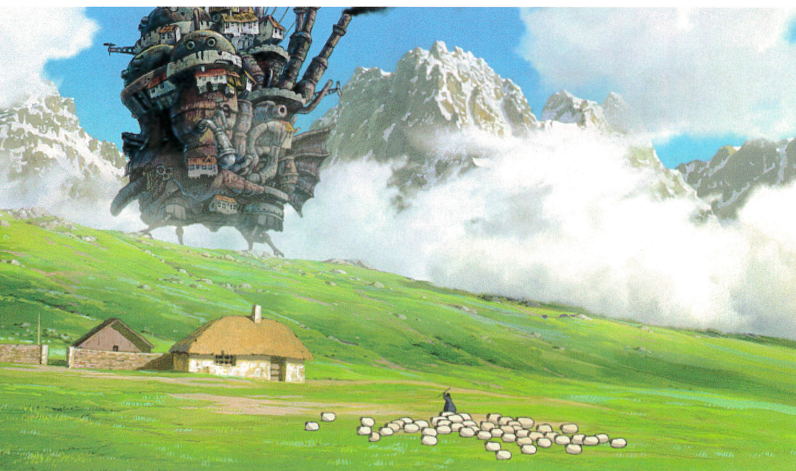
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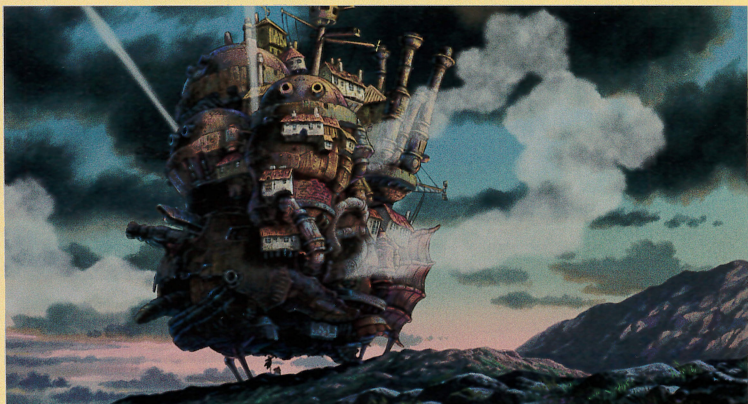


# Howl's Moving Castle

Another enchanting trip down the rabbit hole

Like all of Hayao Miyazaki's miraculous films, *Howl's Moving Castle* can only be described as an out of body experience, although in this case, even compared to the likes of *My Neighbor Totoro* or *Spirited Away*, that one of a kind Miyazaki feeling is somehow even more powerful. For one, the story takes off faster than any of his past works. The castle itself—alone a work of art so astonishing it's difficult to process—is the first thing we see, and our sweet heroine's journey begins almost immediately after, by way of a brief stroll through the city which Miyazaki uses so eloquently to mark the era, mood of the people, and hierarchy of his chosen era. It's as if there's a magic wand guiding his hand as Sophie leaves her dull job to board the train to the bakery, a journey that will change the course of her life forever. The setting is distinctly European; a grand kingdom on

"This is by admission Miyazaki's most heartfelt work. It is also in my opinion his most magical..."



Released by	Buena Vista Home Video	Running Time	119 minutes
Rating	TV/PG	Available	March 7



the brink of war, only accentuated by amazing flying machines and steam-powered vehicles that make it altogether timeless. Complex crowd scenes, traditionally animated and awash with confetti, abound here—a testament to a now lost art—so drink it in because you won't see it again any time soon. Almost directly Sophie is accosted by both human and otherworldly figures, rescued, and, walking on air, delivered to her destination. Just a few minutes into the film and we're deep into Miyazaki territory with new ideas shooting at us faster than we can process them...and then events take a major turn and the real magic begins. To define the story any more would be criminal, if not futile, as, even more so than Miyazaki stories past, the interpretation is in the eye of the beholder. Along the way, as he always does, Miyazaki exposes people's greed, lust for power and material things and the idiocy of war but even more so than usual (I know it seems impossible) the power of love and awakening of one's true self.

This is by admission Miyazaki's most heartfelt work. It is also in my opinion his most magical, surpassing *Spirited Away* or *Princess Mononoke*. Witches, wizards, demons and the most powerful magic, unimaginable by mere mortals, resides

from end to end. From a tiny wisp of fire named Calcifer (played adoringly by Billy Crystal) to a hapless scarecrow, innate objects become more interesting than live action thespians on their best day, and the characters themselves are brought to life through the best dub perhaps ever. Christian Bale, Emily Mortimer, Lauren Bacall and Blyth Danner are all superb and were obviously directed with great care. Getting English voice over to perfectly match Japanese lip syncs while retaining the essence of the story is a near impossible task, yet, they've seen to it. If *Howl's Moving Castle* doesn't win the Oscar for Best Animated Feature (marking Miyazaki's second) I'll be shocked, but regardless it should at the very least find its way into your heart. Dave Halverson

## Howl's Moving Castle

score 10

- + Traditional animation second to none, perfect dub, fast paced, and as enchanting as anything Studio Ghibli has ever produced.
- You're kidding right? The only negative is the pitiful US box office (under 5 mil) compared to the international, roughly 225.



Billy Crystal is such a hothead these days.





# OWNED



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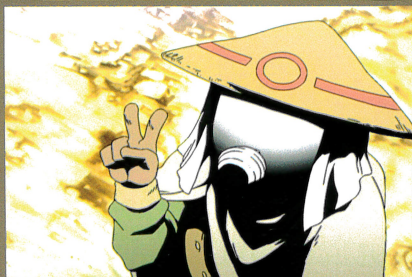
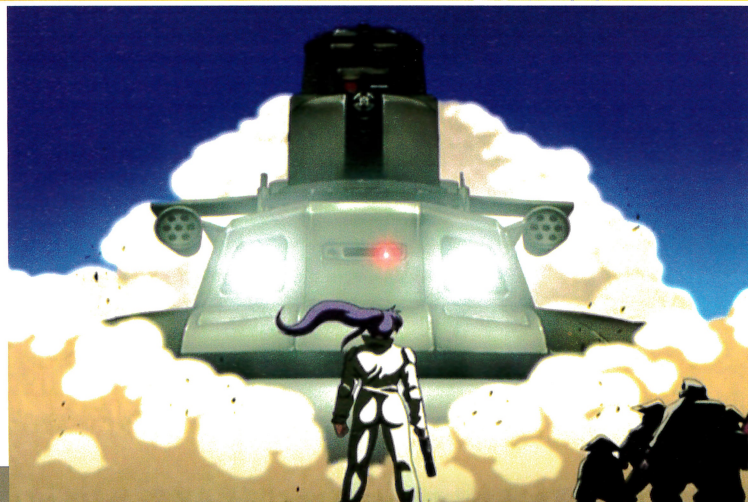
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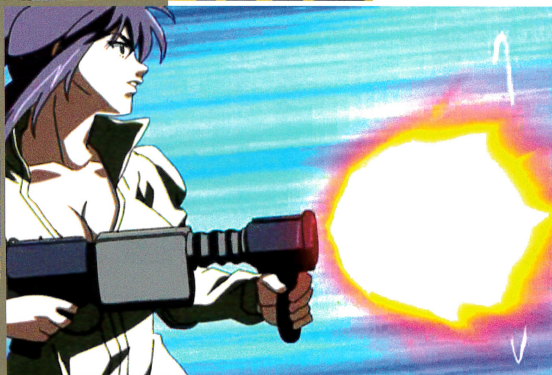
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Released by	FUNimation Entertainment	Running Time	100 minutes
Rating	TV/MA	Available	February 28

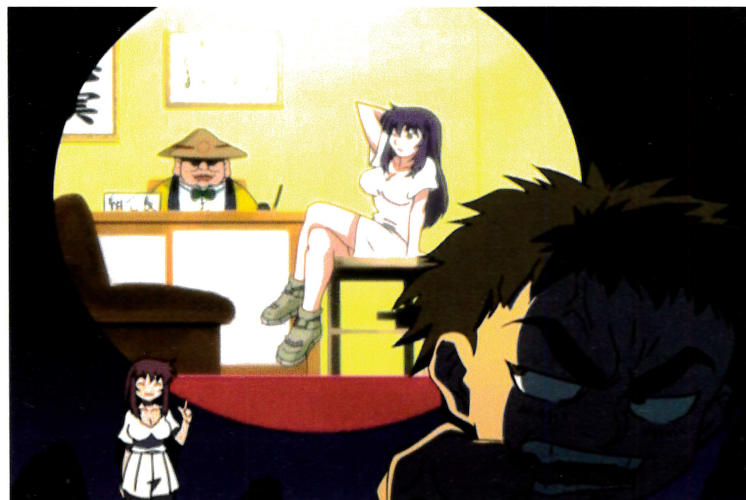


DP in full regalia...Don't let the peace sign fool you.



She'll break your heart...or just blow it to pieces.

"No amount of bullets can penetrate his puny frame and no one, but no one on his dance card gets out alive."



## Desert Punk

Sand dunes, bad dudes, and big boobs

Don't make the boss spill his pudding. You wouldn't like him when he spills his pudding...Unless of course, you're Desert Punk—the wee, nearly invincible demon of the great Kantou Desert that represents what's left of Japan in the future. No amount of bullets can penetrate his puny frame and no one, but no one on his dance card gets out alive. He'll step in when duty calls to assist the downtrodden (only to fleece them for the pleasure), has a mouth like a truck driver, can fly and even dodge bullets—yet he possesses the mental fortitude to “run like a little bitch” when the situation arises. He's one tough little mercenary for hire; nearly invincible if not for his super-sized Achilles' heel...big boobs, (or as he fondly refers to them “knockers, fun bags, milk mounds”...you get my drift) which leads us back to all that pudding. When DP runs across a beautiful, incredibly well-endowed girl, Kosuna, clinging to life after narrowly escaping the local gang where she was forced to make vats of pudding for their boss, who possesses an unnatural affection for the confection along with the ability to transform his flaccid physique into a mass of spit and muscle, he gladly

agrees to take on the entire clan to retrieve her precious necklace, now draped around pudding boy's bulging neck. When the deed is done however (a sight for sore eyes—the show is gorgeous) his stacked princess (after nearly blowing him to bits) steps in and claims the prize...the very same bounty he was sent to plunder. Desert Punk has a rival. Deeming her “Tits McGee” (he somehow lost that lovin' feeling) Desert Punk makes tracks to reclaim the booty, and it's game-on.

This is going to be a great show but purists (give it a rest) and kids beware. *Desert Punk* isn't so much dubbed as “reversioned” (meaning fun for you and me) and it's rated TV MA for good reason. If you like your comedy raw, sexual innuendo served up hot and often, and action fast, then it's time to get some sand in your shoes. Dave Halverson

Desert Punk

score 8.5

- + Great animation, and if you like it crass, really funny: The most unique action/comedy since *Photon*.
- If you're offended by “Americanized” dubs, and dark comedy fueled by low-brow humor, do not apply within.



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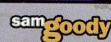
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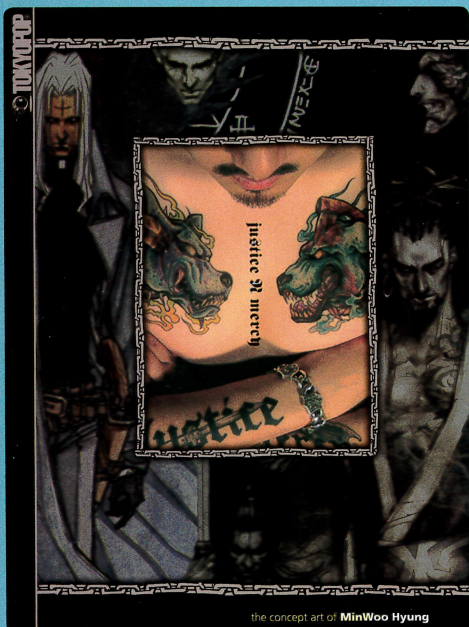
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# anime essentials

must-have anime, manga & music

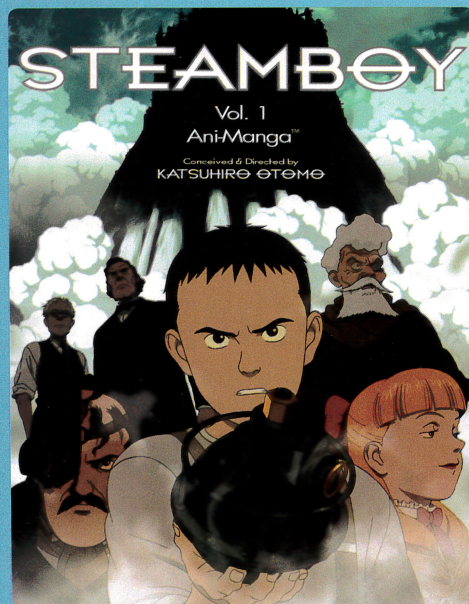
read this



## Justice N Mercy

Released by: TokyoPop | Price: \$39.99 | Slipcased Hardcover Art Book

Available everywhere TokyoPop manga is sold, Justice N Mercy is a stunning, highly collectible collection of Seoul Korea's Min-Woo Hyung (Priest) concept art. Filled with everything from finished colored works to a wide array of unique ideas and subjects, every page has something unique to offer the connoisseur. If you're not a familiar with Min-Woo's work yet you couldn't wish for a better introduction.

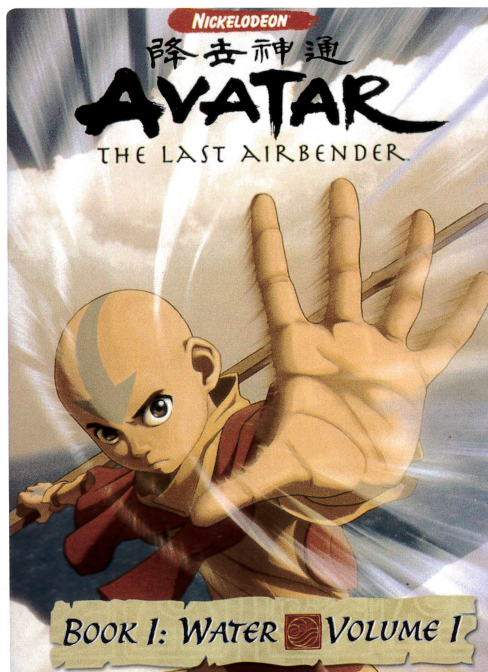


## Steamboy Ani-Manga

Released by: Viz Media | Rated: T | Price: \$19.99

Fans of Katsuhiro Otomo will definitely want to pick up Volume 1 of Viz Media's Ani-Manga; a painstakingly detailed (over 1800 frames directly from the original digital production files) account of the film contained within the pages of a high-quality, collectible oversize book.

watch this



## Avatar: The Last Air Bender Book

Released by: Nickelodeon/Paramount Home Video | Rating: Not Rated | Volume: 1

Nickelodeon... anime? Well not exactly (it was made here) but that doesn't change the fact that it's a cool new series based on four disciplines—Tai Chi for Water Bending, the Hungar style of Kung Fu for Earth Bending, Northern Shaolin Kung Fu for Fire Bending and Baqua for Air Bending—and Aang, a young boy carrying a heavy burden.



## Hare+Guu

Released by: AN Entertainment | Rating: TV PG | Volume: 1

The latest series from An entertainment is one of the freshest and bizarre comedies in recent years. Hare is a normal little boy living in the jungle and Guu is the little girl that's really a pan-dimensional monster with a world inside her stomach. Now that's a premise. Love that new An logo too!



## Neo Ranga

Released by: ADV Films | Rating: TV 14

Neo Ranga debuted amidst a glut of triple-A series and therefore never got its just desserts. Now available in a thin-pack DVD complete collection, just as many a 2005 series is winding down, now is the perfect time to adopt these three charming young ladies and their rather interesting island getaway.



# now reading

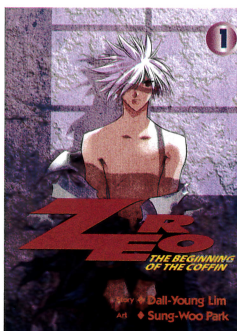
the wonderful world of manga

## Zero: The Beginning of the Coffin

**Publisher:** Infinity Studios | **Volume:** 1 | **Genre:** Sci-Fi Drama | **Rating:** 15+ |  
**Story:** Dall-Young Lim | **Art:** Sung-Woo Park

The second round of action and first major esper (extrasensory perception user) battle in Zero: The Beginning of the Coffin is maybe the best frame by frame that I've ever read. This is truly an extraordinary manga. From the get-go we have two agencies—one official (Tokyo ECS) and one so very not (LEED) in pursuit of the Zero-Type; genetic beings so powerful they're virtually unstoppable...well almost. They also happen to be born of a union between father and daughter and are currently living as younger brother and older sister along with their sibling (a genetic sister/daughter created from the best of each), Katsumi. Think that's odd? Wait until you meet their pursuers...

**Read it if...** You like the brutal and or dark side of fantasy and Sci-Fi.



## Imperfect Hero

...And that's putting it lightly

**Publisher:** Dr. Master | **Volume:** 2 | **Genre:** Sci-Fi Comedy | **Rating:** 13+ |  
**Story and Art:** Nankin Gureko

In Imperfect Hero, the Earth's defenders aren't exactly the cream of the crop. In fact they're five high-school wannabes consisting of an anime freak, a wimp, an eating machine (okay, the fat kid) the "popular girl" and our hero, loser extraordinaire, Yuji Midorikawa. Lucky for him (depending on how you look at it) the queen of the GurDark (the evil organization bent on conquering the earth) had her horn blasted off, turned into a creampuff, and moved into his place. Everything is peachy (well sort of—she does totally flip out when provoked) until her fiancée, Dark General Zaros comes to town in Volume 3 to find her.

**Read it if...** You don't mind a little juvenile delinquency with your superhero, super-action manga.



## Love Roma

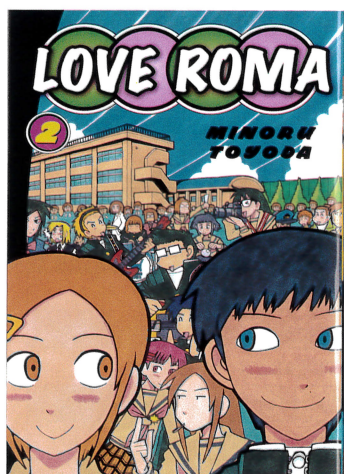
A birds eye view of love...and its by-products.

**Publisher:** Del Rey | **Volume:** 2 | **Genre:** w | **Rating:** 16+ | **Story and Art:** Minoru Toyoda

I can see why Clamp has been telling people to read this manga. Love Roma is smart, fun, and completely original. ...Kind of like a cross between Seinfeld and Peanuts (a.k.a. Charlie Brown). Volume 2 begins headlong into Hoshino-kun and Negishi-san's developing relationship as seen through the eyes and influence of their friends, flipping from the boys' gossip at baseball

practice, where the topic is whether or not Hoshi and Negi "did it", to the girls' lunch table where Negi is sizing up Hoshi's new attitude since his buddies convinced him to play hard-to-get. Sounds juvenile, I know, but it's all in the presentation. Next they go hunting for ghosts and things get even more touchy-feely. How can something rated 16+ be so cute? Somehow it works.

**Read it if...** You're curious about how the opposite sex thinks but not all that interested in the truth.



## Loveless

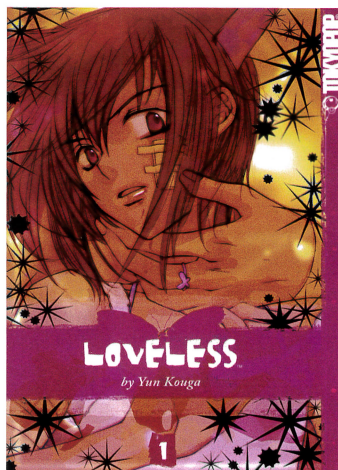
A unique, haunting and engaging tale...with tails

**Publisher:** TokyoPop | **Volume:** 1 | **Genre:** Fantasy/Romance | **Rating:** 16+ | **Story and Art:** Yun Kouga

Loveless is such an engaging read you barely notice the pictures. Volume 1 begins as 12-year-old Ritsuka is being acclimated to a new school after the death of his much beloved older brother, where his first day begins and ends in a most peculiar fashion. After fending off the advances of Yuiko—a girl with unusually large breasts for a 6<sup>th</sup>-grader, who likes to refer to herself in

the third-person—he finds himself in the middle of a war of words (spells) involving a secret society of fighters somehow linked to his brother's murder. This after Soubi (his brother's fighter unit) kisses him and vows to love and protect him...Do I sound like an insane person? Did I mention that everyone but Soubi has cat ears and tails? Trust me, it's wicked cool.

**Read it if...** You're not uncomfortable with sleek man bodies (with cat ears and tails until their virginity is lost) merging in battle.



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吸血鬼獵人日誌

Journal of the Vampire Hunter [1]

冥獸酷殺行

CLAWS OF DARKNESS

Author/Illustrator: Jerry Cho

Based on the novel by: Jozev



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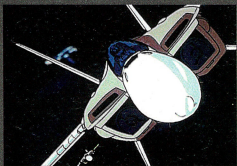
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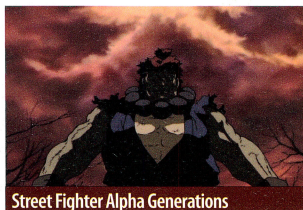
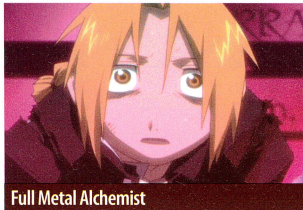
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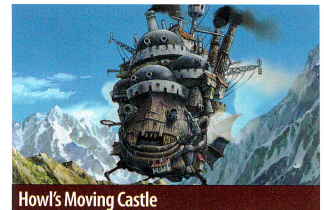
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- 01 Howl's Moving Castle buena vista home entertainment
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- 03 Samurai Champloo geneon entertainment
- 04 Godannar adv films
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- 06 Desert Punk funimation entertainment
- 07 Full Metal Alchemist funimation entertainment
- 08 Gilgamesh adv films
- 09 Genshiken media blasters
- 10 Viewtiful Joe geneon entertainment



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### Dave Halverson

- 01 Howl's Moving Castle buena vista home entertainment
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- 03 Samurai Champloo geneon entertainment
- 04 Godannar adv films
- 05 Gankutsuou geneon entertainment



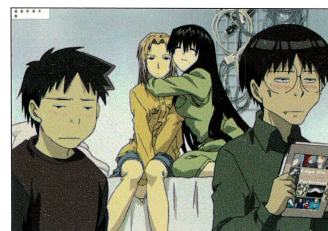
### Jim Dewey

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- 02 Gankutsuou geneon entertainment
- 03 Taro The Dragon Boy discotek
- 04 Panda Z bandai entertainment
- 05 Scrapped Princess bandai entertainment



### Eric Patterson

- 01 Kodocha funimation entertainment
- 02 Howl's Moving Castle buena vista home entertainment
- 03 One Piece viz media
- 04 Golgo 13 urban vision
- 05 Outlanders central park media



### Nelson Lui

- 01 Genshiken media blasters
- 02 Hare+Guu an entertainment
- 03 Godannar adv films
- 04 Desert Punk funimation entertainment
- 05 UFO Ultramaiden Valkyrie adv films



### Reader's Top Five

- 01 Samurai Champloo geneon entertainment
- 02 Burst Angel funimation entertainment
- 03 Full Metal Alchemist funimation entertainment
- 04 Gunslinger Girl funimation entertainment
- 05 Ghost in the Shell SAC 2nd Gig manga/bandai ent.

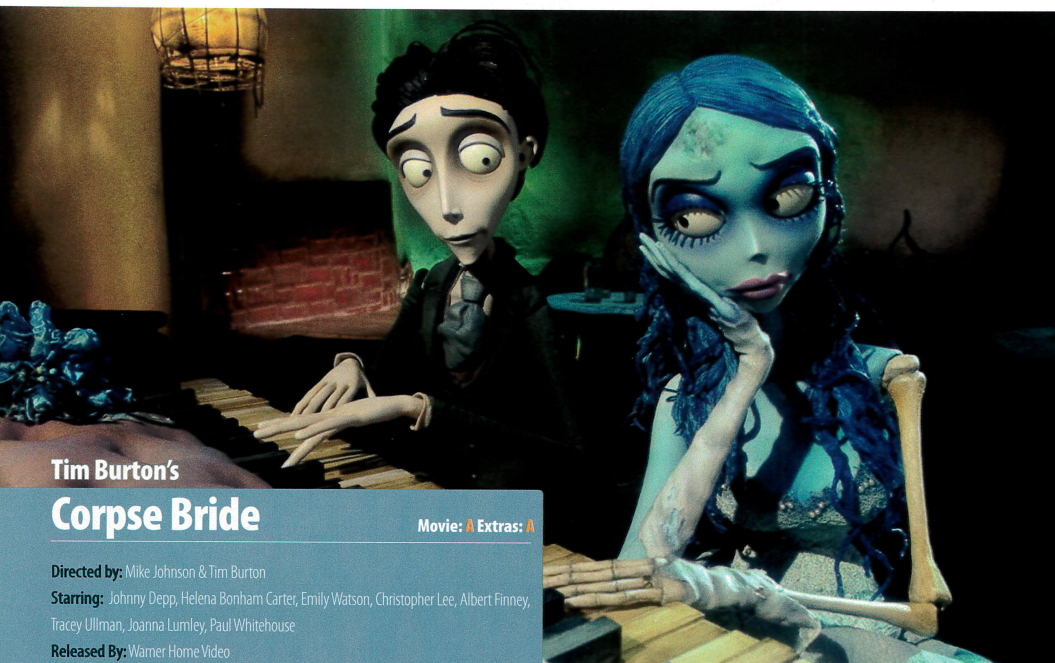
### Reader's Most Wanted

- 01 One Piece viz media
- 02 Street Fighter Alpha Generations manga ent.
- 03 Golgo 13 urban vision
- 04 The Karas manga entertainment
- 05 Desert Punk funimation entertainment

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- 01 Zero (V1) infinity studios
- 02 Loveless (V1) tokyopop
- 03 Tsubasa (V8) del rey
- 04 Imperfect Hero (V3) dr master
- 05 Genshiken (V4) del rey





## Tim Burton's Corpse Bride

Movie: **A** Extras: **A**

**Directed by:** Mike Johnson & Tim Burton

**Starring:** Johnny Depp, Helena Bonham Carter, Emily Watson, Christopher Lee, Albert Finney, Tracey Ullman, Joanna Lumley, Paul Whitehouse

**Released By:** Warner Home Video

**Rated:** PG

It's only because of Tim Burton that we're allowed access into this amazing animation process, a lost art that's been all but replaced by computer animation. These films are really more like great gifts than anything to "critique," so pardon me in advance for simply turning on the shower of praise. Far be it from me to find flaw in this level of craftsmanship and artistry, easily the most highly specialized and organic film-making process in all of cinema. If it failed in any capacity perhaps it would be apropos to judge, but given that all I see is another painstakingly perfect instant classic (only this one without a holiday—perhaps it should be played after funerals), I'll refrain. Comparisons to *The Nightmare Before Christmas* are of course inevitable, but to me that's like trying to spot imperfections in two flawless diamonds.

The visuals in *Corpse Bride*, especially given the

complexity of the puppets, are brilliant beyond anything I've ever seen—every expression (CG-quality facial animation performed by cranking tiny gears within the puppets' heads) and flowing costume a marvel to behold. And once again Tim Burton has managed to surround his vision with greatness. From the master craftsmen (watch every ounce of extras) to the amazing actors and Danny Elfman—who crawls into Burton's head for another rousing opus—every bit of *Corpse Bride* is a product of sheer admiration and love of the craft. The story, Burton's latest play on contrast—this time between the living and the dead (with the dead having all the fun)—is quaint, enchanting, haunting, and at times even scary, as Victor Van Dort squirms his way out of the loving embrace of his Corpse Bride and into the arms of his mortal betrothed. Between *Howl's Moving Castle* and *Corpse Bride* this month, I'm dizzy with admiration. **Dave Halverson**

## Bubble

Movie: **A-** Extras: **B+**

**Directed by:** Steven Soderbergh

**Starring:** Debbie Doebereiner, Dustin Ashley, Misty Wilkins

**Released By:** Magnolia Home Entertainment

**Rated:** R

Available on DVD and pay-per-view the same day of its theatrical release, *Bubble's* raised the ire of a few Hollywood executives and has even been refused screening by a handful of theater owners. Whatever its effect on conventional distribution, the immediate impact is a film of unexpected power. Minimally directed by Steven Soderbergh, the movie contains no professional actors, was shot on a shoestring budget on HD and runs just under 73 minutes. It's so far removed from the typical big-budget release, you may not be prepared for its challenging subtleties and languid tone. *Bubble* takes place in a simple Ohio town, trailing the lives of three blue-collar workers who numbly toil in a drab doll factory, passing the time with idle conversation over fast-food lunches and cigarettes. They don't have any goals, per say, they don't show any overt emotion, but



they do demonstrate, painfully and hauntingly, a need for companionship. Their conversation is dull and mechanical on the surface, but underneath the movies' quiet, almost lifeless pretence, boils a caldron of screams waiting to shatter the unnerving silence. What occurs in the end is more disturbing than shocking, revealing the heart of the characters in a way that rings uncomfortably true. There is a transfixing quality to *Bubble* and its understated realism that hits with tremendous impact upon final reflection. If the film is mistaken for condescension, the uncomfortable point has been missed: there's a mirror here reflecting a tragic piece of us all. **Brady Fiechter**

## QUICK TAKES

### Doom

**Directed by:** Andrzej Bartkowiak / **Starring:** Karl Urban, The Rock, Rosamund Pike /

**Released By:** Universal Home Video / **Rated:** R

Not every video-game movie can be as piss-poor as *Resident Evil Apocalypse* or *House of the Dead*, but *Doom* does its own bang-up job of failing in all the ways that count: Pointless dialogue. Tepid style. Cardboard characters.

Endless point of view shot that is more amusing than successful homage to the game's first-person perspective. One must wonder: why are such capable actors starting to get involved in these ever-growing piles of strategic misses? **BF**

**Movie:** **C** **Extras:** **NA**



### 2046

**Directed by:** Wong Kar-Wai / **Starring:** Tony Leung, Chiu Wai, Gong Li / **Released By:**

Sony Picture Classics / **Rated:** R

A ravishing, unconventional love story that vacillates between a stylish past and hypnotic future, *2046* is as absorbing as it is flawed. Hong Kong director Wong Kar-Wai weaves a subdued tale about an author who builds impassioned yet dysfunctional relationships with a trio of eccentric, not-quite-as-they-seem lovers as he finds inspiration for his futuristic novel. **BF**

**Movie:** **B** **Extras:** **B**



### Jarhead

**Directed by:** Sam Mendes / **Starring:** Jake Gyllenhaal, Peter Sarsgaard, Jamie Foxx, Chris

Cooper / **Released By:** Universal Home Video / **Rated:** R

The Gulf War becomes the oppressive backdrop in Sam Mendes' *Jarhead*, a relatively tiring yet watchable take on the routine psychological toll war takes on its confused soldiers. The movie is shot with a poet's eye for moving imagery, but strip away the skills of the fine actors and rich production and you're left with a movie that puts your emotion on hold with cliché and hollow dialogue. **BF** **Movie:** **B-** **Extras:** **B**



### The Chumscurber

**Directed by:** Arie Posin / **Starring:** Glen Close, Jamie Bell, Ralph Fiennes / **Released By:**

Dreamworks Home Entertainment / **Rated:** R

The darkly humorous *The Chumscurber* paints its cynical portrait of suburban dysfunction with such venomous glee, you practically start to question your own sanity by the unhinged climax. Its message gets a little lost in the loopy, contrived absurdity of the characters and their cartoon existence, but not before entertaining us with some resonant truth along the way. **BF**

**Movie:** **B** **Extras:** **B-**





# Nickelback

Interview  
Bassist Mike Kroeger

Apparently there's a conspiracy on rock radio. It states "ALL Nickelback, ALL the time." It seems over the past four years these Canadians can't do wrong. The band has sold over 19-million records and climbing. Their latest opus *All The Right Reasons* has already sported a number one song with "Photograph," and the band has literally released one hit after another. Bassist Mike Kroeger is one fourth of the equation. He is the low rumble that drives the machine and also the brother of front man Chad Kroeger. The band's tour starts in two days and Mike Kroeger is ready to talk.

By Steven Douglas Losey

## Hey, I'm rolling tape.

Everything I say will be used against me in the court of public opinion.

## Are those Canadian laws?

Yeah, we have the right to remain silent, just not during an interview.

## The old saying is bass players don't get respect.

I don't know if we really want it. I don't really feel that. If somebody's gotta be the whipping boy it might as well be me. I'm up for it. Give me all you got.

## As a unit you guys are often grooving out with a heavy groove. Why do a lot of people think you're just a Top 40 band?

I think they just listen to the radio too much. It's an interesting paradox, 'cause some people say, "all Nickelback does are ballads." They pretend they hate hit radio but they still listen to it. If they listened to the record they would find out what we're really all about and hear our entire scope.



## Some people dis you guys because you're really good at writing hit songs.

That's one measure of success, really, when people take pot shots at you.

## What's most enjoyable about holding down the low end in Nickelback?

I enjoy moving a lot of air on the stage. Between the bass and the drums we nail it down.

## I know your new drummer Daniel Adair is very intense. How is it hearing his massive riffs lock with yours?

I've been saying "good god" for many years. Before Daniel we had Ryan Vekedal. With those guys it's like having two different kinds of chocolate, they're both good but totally different. Daniel brings a different kind of energy to the time and the sound of Nickelback. It's a little more aggressive; a little more type A personality.

## Let's talk about your brother Chad. What do you hate about him?

Just the normal universal stuff that brothers go through. These dynamics are widespread and well documented.

## What, with police reports?

Well, we're not quite the Robinson brothers or the Gallagher brothers. We keep our stuff out of the media.

## What do you love about your brother then?

Being from the same blood is a really good start. He's a great song writer.

## Does he remember your birthday?

Yeah, I think he does. [Chad yells Mike's birthday from another room.] He tried to hug me on stage the other day in front of 13 thousand people.

## Were there some whacked out moments growing up?

Well, it's unusual where we got our first taste of what we thought was music. Our grandmother and grandfather were in a



**"That's one measure of success, really, when people take pot shots at you."**

band together. Grandpa was the bass player and grandma was the drummer and they would throw down with a horn section. I think they did about 20 different versions of "In the Mood." There were accordions everywhere.

## Roll Out the Barrel brother!

Yeah, at the time it seemed really cool. Our grandparents were rock stars.

## What are you listening to these days?

I do a lot of physical training so I respond to a lot of heavy stuff. I listen to Messugah and Slipknot. I dig Killswitch Engage.

## What kind of physical training?

Various cardio things, a lot of weights, a lot of running. I do things with a lot martial arts training, Brazilian Ju Jitsu, things like that.

## So I take it you have a firm handshake? I try to.

## Yeah, I hope so, that would be disappointing if you didn't.

We'll see. When you come down to the show we can get down and see what you got on the mats.

**I didn't think this conversation would get to an "I'll take you outside" kind of thing.** I typically don't for the most part. Usually my combatants are willing.

## What old metal do you dig?

Right now it would be Flotsam and Jetsam and the No Place for Disgrace record.

## Do you like any disco?

How about Sly and the Family Stone?



# BACK OF THE BOOK

03\_06 MIKE GRIFFIN  
PC EDITOR

## 360 Degrees of Separation: The Connected Culture

By the time you read this, the new year will be in full swing and humans everywhere will have recovered from a long holiday season filled with renewed relationships, gaming bliss and assorted stimulation. Over the course of the festivities, encountering friends and family—old and new—and observing strangers strolling through rows of western consumerism, I came to realize that more than ever, people are unbelievably connected to *everything* in life that depends on media and electronics. Whether TV, mobile, games, film or music, people of all ages seem to be more comfortable using consumer electronics than at any point in history, and you have to believe that gaming has played a pretty important role in the progression of the global gadget conscious.

People often surprise me with their ability to adopt and perfectly execute the functions of various electronics. An uncle, who I once thought was totally low-tech, busted out his BlackBerry to jot down the name of a rare White Stripes live album I recommended, destined to filter down his iTunes pipeline later that week. This man was in the “I can’t even program the time on my VCR” category just a few years ago and he brandished that mobile device so effortlessly it looked like he had a hand in its creation. When I gave him my PSP and *Burnout Legends*, it was over: his eyes lit up like a Christmas tree and he didn’t budge for an hour straight. The last video game he played was probably *Wrecking Crew* on NES, yet there he was, altogether at ease with the buttons and configuration of the PSP after a quick 5-minute summary.

What is the facilitator here? Electronic devices are certainly more intuitive than ever and they share many similar functions and interface styles. Maybe that’s it. Perhaps people are graduating from techno-klutz to electro-guru simply

because they have no choice in the matter; life demands it now. It doesn’t hurt that your core experience with one device may very well be analogous to using any number of comparable products. I ran into a dozen people who, despite concerted efforts to remain detached from their work, couldn’t help themselves: they *had* to network with the office and other barely-vacationing co-workers. Oddly enough, it rarely looked like an undesirable chore. The ease with which they could connect with associates—subtly demonstrating the neat-o-factor of their chosen device—diminished the stigma of business compromising personal time. People get to work with the coolest toys now.

Meanwhile, the gamers I encountered were making the rounds online as per their daily routine, multitasking half a dozen applications while maintaining a conversation with the real world. A friend had his laptop browser open to a music site message board where he yapped about Lady Sovereign signing to Def Jam and how the label would make the diminutive Londoner a one-hit wonder in America. He was also following threads in a popular MMO discussion forum, dropping some clinically precise damage equations for a specific character class—much to the chagrin of several disenfranchised posters. Later in the day I watched him play *Geometry Wars* while debating the value of online etiquette with a random, poison-tongued Live player. Whether confirming a shipment with a business partner thousands of miles away or raising the ire of online players all over the globe, we’ve all become secretly addicted to networking via electronic interaction because the devices in this

“...we’ve all become secretly addicted to networking via electronic interaction because the devices in this era make it so easy to exchange data and opinion on any topic, any time...”

era make it so easy to exchange data and opinion on any topic, any time. That counts for a lot in an age where virtual societies are built faster than any village and economies from all walks of life share the currency of information. It’s trans-medial, it’s viral and it’s at your fingertips.

So here we are, 2006: the year of next-gen consoles and unprecedented connectivity options. Broadband and high-definition broadcasting are part of the establishment and on the cusp of full-scale saturation. New optical disc formats will be introduced. Episodic game content will find its way to hard drives, and players will begin to experience the value of shorter, higher quality game sessions. Online communities will continue to expand at an astronomical rate. The Dickian vision of future technology will surely come to pass: advertisements and promotion integrated into every element of entertainment media, seamless enough to desensitize millions to their presence. And gaming will continue to be one of the most sophisticated, versatile and accessible forms of entertainment—lighting the path to a future of borderless culture and electronic enlightenment. And eventually, perhaps, some really scary robots.







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